PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 342

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1999–2000

COMPRISING PERIOD
10 January—20 January 2000

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HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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10 January 2000

THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 342**

FOURTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1999–2000

House of Commons

Monday 10 January 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Severe Disablement Allowance

1. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that all those severely disabled people who are potentially eligible for severe disablement allowance are encouraged to claim it. [102927]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Severe disablement allowance does not provide sufficient help for those in the greatest need—those who were born disabled, or who were disabled so severely early in life that they may never be able to work and to build up a national insurance contribution record. When our welfare reforms come into effect, those young people will be able to claim incapacity benefit without having to meet the usual contribution conditions. After a year in benefit, that will be worth up to £26.40 a week more than severe disablement allowance. Existing recipients of SDA will retain the benefit in future, as long as they continue to meet the entitlement conditions. We are already taking a number of steps to raise awareness of SDA among severely disabled people, and we will ensure that the forthcoming changes are well publicised.

Mr. George: Those who warned the Government against abolition of severe disablement allowance—which will undeniably have a particular impact on some disabled women, on young carers and on low earners—look to them to soften the blow that their policy will inflict on a group of people who are, after all, disabled through no fault of their own. Bearing that in mind, along with the fact that this is the first question of a new century, will the Minister openly recognise that the policy will have a severe impact on some people, and ensure that awareness and take-up campaigns are given high priority this year?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman fails to recognise that severe disablement allowance does least for those who are poorest. Seventy per cent.—the poorest—of those who receive it receive not a penny of benefit, because every penny of the SDA that they receive will be lost from their income support. The changes that we are making will help those who need help most: the poorest and the most severely disabled. That is why we are making the changes, and are proud to be doing so. In future, we shall benefit young people of both sexes who in the past would have faced a lifetime on means-tested benefits, but who will now be raised to incapacity benefit level.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Does my hon. Friend agree that, when people are wrongly turned down for this benefit—or for any other disability benefit—they are caused severe upset and disappointment? When does he expect to be certain that arrangements are in place to ensure that that does not happen any more?

Mr. Bayley: When anyone is wrongly turned down for benefit, it is a serious matter. We need an appeals system to ensure that people receive the benefits to which they are entitled. The appeals system that we inherited was inadequate, partly because of delays and partly because of

the faults inherent in it. We have reformed it: we have speeded it up, and our approach to benefits seeks to ensure that the right decision is made in the first place and that decisions remain right thereafter.

Child Poverty

2. **Mr. Derek Twigg** (Halton): What steps he is taking to ensure that all tiers of government are involved in tackling child poverty. [102928]

4. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): If he will report on the progress of the Government's proposals to tackle child poverty. [102930]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): We are making real progress in tackling child poverty. We are the first Government to be committed to eradicating child poverty in a generation, and to halving it within 10 years.

Mr. Twigg: Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in the north-west, more than half a million children live in households with less than half the average income? My constituency has some of the highest poverty rates in the country, and has the highest infant mortality rate in England. Child poverty is an important issue in the north-west.

The difference between this Government and the last lies in the fact that we recognise the existence of poverty, and are publishing indicators enabling us to measure it and to do something about it. Is it not important, however, for all the agencies to work together to tackle poverty through initiatives such as sure start? If we are judged on anything at the end of our tenure, it will be on how much effect we have had in reducing child poverty.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. The previous Government spent considerable time denying that poverty even existed, which damned a generation of children from the start because they happened to have been born in the wrong place at the wrong time, under a Tory Government.

We recognise that poverty and the causes of poverty must be dealt with. That is why we are increasing child benefit and ensuring that more people obtain jobs through the new deal, as a result of which nearly 170,000 have found work. We have introduced the sure start schemes, one of which is operating in my hon. Friend's constituency, and we are increasing investment in health and education. Every one of those measures is opposed by the Conservative party. It is clear to people in this country that only a Labour Government are committed to eradicating poverty and doing something concrete to deal with the problems that we inherited.

Mr. Robertson: Is not the worst thing that a child can inherit from its parents a belief in the welfare dependency culture, and are not the Government's policies increasing welfare dependency? Is not the best lesson that children can be taught the lesson that welfare can provide only a very basic standard of living, and that the phrase "work ethic" constitutes, of itself, an important concept?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman misses the point. The Conservative Government increased welfare dependency during their 18 years in power. They increased social security spending by 90 per cent., but there was more poverty, there were more divisions, the gap between rich and poor widened, and nearly a third of children were born into poverty. No decent Government could tolerate that, which is why we have introduced the new deal to get people into work, increased child benefit by a record amount, and increased spending on education and health to ensure that all children are given the best possible chance in life. That would never have happened but for the change of Government.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): I commend the Government's actions to combat poverty, especially on behalf of the 3,800 families in Lancaster and Wyre who are benefiting directly from the Government's national minimum wage and the working families tax credit. They are being assisted to work their way out of poverty. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he is also looking at the impact of housing benefit and council tax benefit on those families to ensure that the Government's commendable actions are not undermined by further reductions in those benefits?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. The objective of the Government's policy is to ensure that everyone who can work does work and that they do not depend on benefits. That is why we have made changes to the tax and benefit system to ensure that work pays through the working families tax credit—again, a measure that is opposed by the Conservative party—and why we are looking at housing benefit reform to ensure that it pays to go into work and that people do not face unnecessary barriers to getting into work.

We have reduced the starting rate of tax and introduced benefit run-ons to ensure that everyone who works sees the benefit of their work, which helps not only them, but, in particular, all the children who, until now, have been condemned to a life of poverty. The important point is that the Conservative party opposes every one of those measures. Were it ever returned to power, every measure to make work pay and to get the country back into work would be completely set aside. It does not believe in tackling the problem in the first place.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): The hon. Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) is right to say that all tiers of government have to be brought to bear to tackle matters such as child poverty. However, will the Secretary of State confirm that, in the next financial year, his budget for pilot projects and other new programmes, including interdepartmental programmes to tackle such matters, will be top-sliced by some £50 million? Does he share my concern that the top-slicing of the Department's budget is in danger of getting out of control? Who is co-ordinating the work to deal with child poverty and other matters? Will he assure the House that someone is properly evaluating that work?

Mr. Darling: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I spend many hours looking at my budget. I also confirm that the Government have embarked on a number of projects to ensure that we use the best possible means to eradicate child poverty. I commend to him "Opportunity for All" which was published last year and which, for the first time ever, shows what we are doing across government to

tackle poverty and, most important, to deal with the causes of poverty, such as lack of educational opportunity, lack of jobs, poor health and poor housing. All the measures are being brought together.

The next poverty report setting out the Government's strategy and the progress that we are making—we are the first Government ever prepared to be judged on what we do—will be published in the autumn. I would have thought that most impartial observers, including the hon. Gentleman, would accept that the present Government, unlike any in the recent past, are doing much to eradicate one of the scourges of society: poverty and child poverty in particular.

Carers

3. **Mrs. Sylvia Heal** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis): What support his Department is providing for carers. [102929]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Invalid care allowance and the carer premium in income support are specifically designed for carers, who may be entitled to other more general benefits, depending on their circumstances.

Mrs. Heal: Is my hon. Friend aware that the position of carers can be improved not just by those benefits, important though they are to carers, but by improving the help that is available to the disabled people for whom they care?

Mr. Bayley: I agree with my hon. Friend. Measures that help both deserving groups are especially valuable. I am therefore particularly pleased to announce extra help for disabled people who have to spend time in hospital. The change will also benefit carers. I intend to lay regulations to provide that people receiving disability living allowance or attendance allowance will be able to receive benefit for the days both of admission to, and discharge from, hospital. The regulations will also ensure that all disabled people receiving DLA or attendance allowance who pay the full cost of their care and residential accommodation, however it is owned or managed, will be eligible for benefit.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Can the Minister explain why someone who is on income support, reaches the age of 65 and wishes to become a carer should not be allowed the carers premium? Is that not an outrageous example of ageist Government policy?

Mr. Bayley: Benefits for carers were introduced by the previous Labour Government under Jim Callaghan. In the 18 years in which the Conservatives were in power, they followed a policy that was adopted before they came to power: that an income replacement benefit, such as invalid care allowance, should not be paid in addition to another income replacement benefit, such as retirement pension. That policy was operated under the previous Conservative Government, the previous Labour Government and the current one, and there is no intention to change it.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): The Minister will be well aware that caring is a difficult job and hard work; that many carers are themselves elderly; that provision of respite care is desperately important for all of them; and that there seems to be no national basis for the respite care provided by local authorities. Is he prepared to examine the current situation—in which different standards of respite care are offered—and ensure that every local authority is required to provide sufficient places, so that every carer is able each year to have at least a few weeks away from having to care for the elderly, the disabled or people with learning difficulties?

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I am glad to say that my colleagues in the Department of Health have improved availability of respite care by making available an additional £140 million as part of the national carers strategy, and that they are creating a charter for long-term care to address the type of issues raised by my hon. Friend. Additionally, the measure that I announced today—which will reduce the amount of benefit lost by those who go into hospital for respite care—will make respite care more generally available.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Although the extra two days are welcome, Opposition Members were disappointed with the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley). Substantial change is occurring within the population, and, in the next 10 years, the greatest challenge facing people in care will be the number of carers who are themselves relatively elderly, but who take care of frail parents or look after disabled children. If the state were to provide that care, the bill would be considerable. Surely it would make sense to help those people to continue to care by getting rid of the age restriction of 65 on invalid care allowance and carers premium. Will the Government reconsider their position?

Mr. Bayley: Invalid care allowance was introduced as a benefit to replace the income of people of working age who were forced to give up full-time work because they were caring for someone who needed care for more than 35 hours a week. It is a benefit for people of working age: it was introduced for that purpose, and it has always been a benefit for that purpose. In the 18 years in which the previous Conservative Government were in power, they did not seek to change the benefit. I am surprised that, having done nothing about it in their 18 years in office, they have suddenly changed their mind.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): I welcome the new initiatives that my hon. Friend has announced today. They will make a considerable difference to people in my constituency, many of whom are elderly or disabled carers. However, I underline the important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn). There is somewhat—to put it mildly—of a lottery in local authority social service provision for carers. Will the Minister, in addition to making available

the funds that he announced today, ask his officials to consider encouraging—if encouraging does not work, requiring—local authorities to take the matter on board?

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. The Department of Health is responsible for making services available to carers and for social services policy throughout the country. I have no doubt that Health Ministers will take note of what has been said in the House today. They are already acting on the basis that my hon. Friend suggests.

Advance Corporation Tax

5. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): What discussions he has had with the Treasury on the effect on pensioners of the abolition of the ACT dividend tax credits. [102931]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): The Government withdrew the tax credits as part of a wider package of reforms that will help companies and benefit the economy overall.

Mr. Loughton: Will the Secretary of State come clean and acknowledge that one of the most iniquitous effects of the Government's stealth tax on pensions was to deprive the less-well-off pensioners who are not liable for tax of a few hundred pounds in tax credits, on which many of them greatly depended? Will he stand by his soundbites about giving a fairer deal to poorer pensioners and lobby the Chancellor hard to give back those ill-gotten gains to the 300,000 poorer pensioners who really need them, including many in my constituency?

Mr. Darling: The changes that we made after the general election have been widely welcomed because they will benefit companies and the economy overall. *[Interruption.]* The shouts from the Conservatives would have more credibility if they were committed to restoring the previous ACT system—I do not think that they are. Since the abolition of ACT in 1997, there has been a positive cash flow of £1 billion to business. In addition, because of the action that we have taken, two thirds of pensioners do not pay income tax. We have taken 200,000 pensioners out of tax and 1.5 million pensioners will benefit from the extension of the 10p starting rate of income tax by an average of £55 a year. Every one of those measures was opposed by the Conservatives.

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): Is not one of the most effective ways of helping pensioners with modest incomes to take them out of the tax system? Will my right hon. Friend continue to press his Treasury colleagues for above-inflation increases in the pensioner's personal allowance?

Mr. Darling: As my hon. Friend said, the Government have done a great deal to help those pensioners who previously paid tax. Two thirds of pensioners now do not pay tax. We have taken 200,000 pensioners out of tax. Across the board, regardless of whether pensioners pay tax, the Government are honouring their manifesto pledge to ensure that pensioners share in this country's rising prosperity, not just through the tax system but through the winter fuel payment, the minimum income guarantee and other measures that help them a great deal. That help was never there under the previous Tory Government.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Does the Secretary of State agree with his former ministerial colleague, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who was a Minister at the time that the changes were introduced? He says that they imposed a £2.5 billion tax hit on pension funds in 1997–98. If the Secretary of State does not agree, will he give his estimate of the impact on pension funds of that horrific change in their tax treatment? Of all the Government's stealth taxes, is not that the biggest and the worst?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman's protestations would have more credibility if he were committing his party to the restoration of the ACT system. I do not believe that business in this country wants another change to corporation tax. As a result of the changes that we have made, there has been a £1 billion cash advantage to businesses and we have the lowest-ever rate of corporation tax. That has increased the profitability of companies. On top of that, we have a healthy and stable economy and an end to the boom and bust that characterised the Tory years. Most businesses welcome the way in which we are running the economy. By helping businesses and the economy, we help pensioners as well.

Mr. Willetts: I asked a simple, factual question to which we are still waiting for an answer. If the Secretary of State will not take responsibility for pension funds as a whole, will he at least accept some responsibility for the ACT burden that he has imposed on public sector funded pension schemes? Will he confirm the figures in *Pensions Week* today that show that local authority pension schemes around the country face enormous extra charges because of the change in the tax regime: £30 million for Greater Manchester; £33 million for Cornwall and £75 million for Staffordshire? We will find that, along with the pensioners referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) and future pensioners, council tax payers will pick up the tab for the hefty increase in tax on pension funds. However, we do not have a simple answer to a simple question about how big the tax hit is.

Mr. Darling: The answer is that our tax changes will benefit the economy and companies in this country and, because of that, will benefit pensioners and pension funds. We have reduced the rate of corporation tax, and we have some of the lowest interest rates that this country has seen for years. We have a benign economy that is helping companies to increase their profitability, and that will help pension funds. The changes that we have made are in the best long-term interests of the economy. I assume that the hon. Gentleman is saying, on behalf of the Conservative party, that he intends to scrap the system and go back to the old one. That would be another reason for British business to regard the Tories as hopelessly out of touch with the needs of this country.

Disability Benefits

6. **Mr. John Healey** (Wentworth): What measures he is taking to monitor the operation of the new rules covering appeals over claims for disability benefits. [102932]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): Arrangements are in place to monitor the effects of the changes that we have made to decision making and handling appeals. We will look, for example, at the time taken to prepare submissions and the length of time that it takes for an appeal to be heard.

Mr. Healey: I welcome the changes to the appeals system, which mean that the Appeals Service is at last starting to clear the backlog of cases. In monitoring the changes, will my hon. Friend look at the new one-month deadline for clients between the adjudication officer's decision and the appeal? That is causing some concern to local benefits advisers in Rotherham. Will she keep an open mind on extending that time limit if there is evidence that some clients genuinely cannot cope with that tight deadline?

Angela Eagle: We introduced the changes in decision making and appeals in respect of disability living allowance and disability working allowance on 18 October, so it is far too soon to say whether the problems that my hon. Friend suspects may be occurring are occurring. I have no problem about pledging that we will keep the matter under review. However, to ensure that the appeals process is fast and effective, there has to be balance. The Independent Tribunal Service—the new appeals agency—has reduced the case load backlog from 70,000 in February to 11,800 last October. Waiting times have gone down from the average of seven months that we inherited to about 16 weeks, which is an enormous improvement.

All-Work Test

7. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): If he will make a statement on the future of the all-work test. [102933]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We are in the process of replacing the all-work test with the personal capability assessment, which will play a key role in supporting disabled people and encouraging them to take steps back to work. Regulations are now in place to enable medical assessments to provide positive information on what people can do, as well as what they cannot. Last month, we started using the personal capability assessment in the ONE areas.

Mr. Leigh: The concept of changing the all-work test to a test to gauge people's personal capabilities may be a good one, but is the Minister aware of the concern among many disabled people, particularly given that Ministers originally talked about some people abusing the system? How can we keep the existing medical criteria—as the Minister intends to do—and stop people abusing the system without putting undue pressure on people, especially those with learning difficulties, who often find form filling demanding?

Mr. Bayley: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the medical criteria for entitlement to incapacity benefit will not change as a result of the changes that we have made to the all-work test. For example, people who cannot walk and use wheelchairs will score 15 points, and therefore qualify for incapacity benefit, as they have done in the past. Many people who use wheelchairs can and do work. That includes Members of this House and of another place who use wheelchairs and do extremely demanding full-time jobs.

The personal capability assessment supplements the test of entitlement to benefit—which does not change in any way—with medical advice on the steps that people may take to make it more possible for them to work should they want to do so. That is the Government's intention, and that is what we are doing.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Is not it essential to raise the standard of examinations? Several of my constituents have been traumatised by medical practitioners who have performed poorly. Will my hon. Friend confirm that he is working hard to raise standards in the all-work test? Some of my constituents have been advised that they cannot take along a representative to the test; will he confirm that they can in fact do so?

Mr. Bayley: The simple answer to that final point is yes, they can.

The overwhelming majority of examinations by medical services are conducted to a high standard. One of our recent innovations is to grade the reports—grade A, B and C—to keep much closer control of the quality of advice that is given, but it is true that the advice sometimes does not come up to a decent standard; when that happens, both Government and Opposition Members complain. The Government are taking a wide range of steps to improve the quality and consistency of the advice that medical services give to decision makers on the benefits: toughening the selection and recruitment procedures, improving in-service training and improving the clinical advice on disability assessment medicine that is given to the doctors who provide the advice to decision makers.

Child Support Agency

8. **Mrs. Caroline Spelman** (Meriden): If he will make a statement on the work load of the independent case examiner of the CSA. [102934]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): The case load of the independent case examiner rose from 1,087 cases in 1997–98 to 1,536 in 1998–99. The average clearance time for cases being dealt with by early resolution was 17.2 weeks, and 33.6 weeks for those that were accepted for full investigation.

Mrs. Spelman: In view of the volume of complaints, the independent case examiner warned the Social Security Committee in November that she may be turning complaints about the unfairness of the legislation back to parliamentarians. Is it right for her to do that?

Angela Eagle: The legislation governing child support is being changed. Indeed, the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill has its Second Reading tomorrow.

It would seem odd for the independent case examiner to do other than examine how a case has gone through rather than taking complaints about the structure of a system that Parliament is right in the middle of changing.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): Will my hon. Friend have regard to the pressure on the independent case examiner's department? Perhaps a little more co-operation from the Child Support Agency might help, but a substantial improvement would result if some of the Government's proposals to improve the agency's work were brought forward. With such an approach, it would be substantially easier for people to understand the system and there would be less reference to the independent case examiner.

Angela Eagle: The case examiner's case load has gone up, but it is still the same proportion of cases, because the case load of the Child Support Agency as a whole has gone up. The proportion was 0.015 per cent. of cases last year, and 0.016 per cent. this year.

My hon. Friend made a point about the difficulty of the legislation. The whole of Parliament recognises that, and we will take steps to put it right—not least through tomorrow's Second Reading—and change the entire system. We have already made available an additional £28 million to deliver improvements to the current system. Many right hon. and hon. Members know that the basic problem with the system that we inherited is that it is too complicated to be administered easily, and we all know the implications of that, which is why we are making the changes.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): The case examiner will be rushed off her feet in October 2001 if the new computers that the Child Support Agency is paying for are not ready in time for the new formula. Given that the Department is incapable of paying pensions on time because of a computer bungle—despite a year of promising to sort out the problem—will the Minister guarantee on the record that the new system will not be put into place until the computers are ready?

Angela Eagle: I was astonished by the coverage that the hon. Gentleman provoked in the newspapers today about a reply I gave to him. He claimed that the computer system—which, by the way, does not yet exist, because Parliament has given us no money to buy it—is in chaos and delayed already. It is not delayed. It is on time to the extent—*[Interruption.]* We are in discussions with the providers of the computer system and we are drawing up the spec for it. The hon. Gentleman should—*[Interruption.]* We have been open about the fact that we will not introduce the new arrangements before we have a viable computer system in place. The previous Government did that when they bought an off-the-shelf system from Florida that was first made in 1975 and is now hopelessly out of date and useless at the job. We still have to use it and that is why the system is in such disarray.

We will get a new computer system, but the hon. Gentleman should stop scaremongering about things that do not exist yet. The reply that I gave him said that the child support project would be over in 2003, but he clearly does not realise that projects wind down only after computer systems have been turned on and the entire case load has been moved over. The hon. Gentleman should stop scaremongering and try to help us make the change.

Winter Fuel Payments

9. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): How successful his Department was in getting winter fuel payments to all eligible pensioners before Christmas. [102935]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The payment process for the winter fuel payments went extremely well indeed. Some 10 million people in more than 7.5 million households were issued with their winter fuel payments before Christmas.

Helen Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. In view of the judgment of the European Court in the Taylor case, what action will he take to get payments to those who are now deemed eligible for them?

Mr. Rooker: We shall take every action, because the judgment means that everyone who is ordinarily resident in Great Britain and aged over 60 is eligible. Significantly, that includes people who are not in receipt of any of the qualifying benefits and, because the payments are non-contributory and not means-tested, it includes those who are working. We are committed to finding the extra 1.5 million people to pay them what they are owed for the past two years and we will make an announcement on the issue in due course.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am encouraged to hear that all pensioners over 60 are eligible for winter fuel payments. Can the Minister explain why Mrs. Stockdale of Leeming village has not received a winter fuel payment for 1999 or 1998?

Mr. Rooker: I did not talk about pensioners. In the context of the European Court's decision, it is no longer appropriate to talk about pensioners. Everyone aged over 60 who is ordinarily resident in this country is eligible, whether they work or not. I cannot explain why someone has been missed out more than once, but if the hon. Lady will give me the details, we will do our best to rectify the mistake forthwith.

Information Technology

10. **Dr. George Turner** (North-West Norfolk): What assessment he has made of the scope for improved IT in the administration of his Department and of benefits payments. [102937]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): The potential for new technology to transform the welfare state is enormous. However, our current IT infrastructure is old and out of date. It also essentially computerises clerical processes. We have ambitions for a major transformation, including more interactivity, telephone access and more remote access, all of which cannot be achieved overnight.

Dr. Turner: My hon. Friend the Minister has reminded the House that the chaos that the CSA brought to the lives

of many of my constituents was amplified by the horrific computer-generated literature that it used to send en masse, with people sometimes receiving two or three five-page missives a week. It is obvious that we need to learn the lessons of the past when considering computerisation in the future and I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend's reassurance that the arrangements in the new Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill will be properly supported. It was clear when my hon. Friend visited my constituency that wholesale reform of the Department's IT is needed. Is there a timetable and is the budget sufficient?

Angela Eagle: There is a timetable. Clearly, the Child Support Agency computer system must take priority because of the new legislation to go on the statute book, which we cannot put into effect without a new system. It says something for the legacy of the previous Government that the CSA, the newest agency in the social security system, still has a computer system that is unusable in the modern age.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Part of that legacy was a benefit card project that would have ensured a future for post offices around the country delivering benefits. The Government have abandoned that project. Is the Minister aware of the widespread concern among post office staff about their future under the Government's proposals? Under the previous Government, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), now Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, wrote to all the sub-postmasters and postmistresses in his constituency recognising the widespread concern about any change in the method of payment for pensions and other benefits to automated credit transfer. The hon. Gentleman said that such a change would

"cause severe difficulties for many constituents who rely on the post office to cash their benefits and, in some cases, may not even have a bank account."

He promised a petition then, on behalf of the people who wanted to keep using their post offices. Will there be another petition now?

Angela Eagle: I hate to carp, but part of the problem with all these computer systems is the huge mess that we inherited from the previous Government, from the national insurance recording system 2 to the Horizon project, to which the hon. Gentleman refers. This project was three years behind time when it was cancelled, and was providing infrastructure that has already been overtaken by other developments. The new system will automate the Post Office and will still enable people to get their benefits from post offices if they so desire.

The cost of ACT is 1p per transaction. The hon. Gentleman expects us to stick with order books, when it costs 49p per transaction to present an order book foil, and 79p per transaction to encash a giro. That is very old and expensive technology. ACT will save us £400 million per annum when it is introduced, and we anticipate saving another £240 million on fraud. The hon. Gentleman cannot tell us off about fraud and also tell us off when we introduce a system to prevent it.

Local Exchange Trading Schemes

11. **Mrs. Linda Gilroy** (Plymouth, Sutton): If he will make a statement on the treatment of local exchange trading scheme units for the purpose of calculating benefits. [102938]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): If unemployed people undertake local exchange trading scheme activities for less than 16 hours a week on average, they can earn up to £260 worth of credits in a year without affecting their benefit. Our understanding is that the average level of earnings from local exchange trading systems is around £80 a year.

Mrs. Gilroy: My hon. Friend has taken a great interest in LET schemes, and is aware of the report of the policy action team on jobs, which was published before Christmas. That made a number of recommendations, including piloting changes to the rules on local exchange trading schemes and units. Is my hon. Friend considering such changes to the rules so that LET schemes can play their full role in helping people to re-enter the labour market?

Angela Eagle: I know that my hon. Friend takes a close interest in LETS and is involved in their development. We recognise their value in promoting social inclusion and their potential in easing a move to full-time work. We have received representations and, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the report of the policy action team on jobs, issued on 7 December by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, also makes similar points. We are looking closely at the report's recommendations, and will make announcements in due course.

Women Pensioners

12. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): What proposals he has to address the financial needs of women pensioners. [102940]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): We are committed to ensuring that our pension reforms improve women's pension rights. Our plans to reform the state earnings-related pension scheme through the introduction of the state second pension will dramatically enhance state pension provision and will be of particular benefit to women, many of whom work part time or as carers. The state second pension will give a dramatic boost to the additional pension entitlement of low earners and, for the first time, will help carers and some long-term disabled people with broken work records, to build up a second pension.

For today's pensioners, the minimum income guarantee is available to provide a basic income in retirement for the poorest women pensioners, as it is to all who qualify.

Ms Keeble: In my constituency, some 8,000 women—about a quarter of all the people in employment—work part time. Almost all of them are in the income bracket that qualifies for the second state pension. Is my right hon. Friend aware of the pressures that many women face when they have to give up work to look after disabled relatives, so that raises the possibility of a break in their

pension entitlement? Does he agree that, for future generations of pensioners, a carers pension linked to the state second pension would ensure that people have a decent and independent pension entitlement? Would it not also ease the pressures that women face by rewarding them, through the pension provision, for staying at home and looking after families and disabled relatives?

Mr. Rooker: Yes. Figures show that some 2 million carers—at least 1.5 million of whom are women—would benefit under the second state pension, for which, for the first time, people are beginning to build up entitlement. There are 4.5 million low earners in this country, of whom 70 per cent. are women, and 6 million moderate earners. All those people—more than 10 million of them, the majority of whom will be women—will gain under the state second pension.

Mr. Michael Trend (Windsor): The Minister told us some weeks ago that he was looking with urgency at the position of war widows, in whose circumstances I know that he is deeply interested. Does he now agree with us that war widows should be allowed to retain their husbands' occupational pensions, or will that possibility be lost from sight again?

Mr. Rooker: It will not be lost from sight, as there is at least one clause on war pensions in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill that we are to debate tomorrow. However, the matter is under active consideration in the Ministry of Defence, where the decision will be taken. In due course, the appropriate Ministers will come to the House and account for their decisions.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there remain significant numbers of pensioners, mainly older women, who refuse to apply for the minimum income guarantee because of the income support label that it carries? Will he urgently consider how the benefit is labelled? Might it not be better to call it a supplementary pension, or something similar, so that what is sometimes wrongly considered to be a stigma could help those pensioners who need it?

Mr. Rooker: Yes. Our research shows that the largest group of people missing out on the minimum income guarantee are older women. We are to initiate a Government-sponsored take-up campaign for the minimum income guarantee, which will include a partial rebranding of the benefit to meet the point that my hon. Friend makes about the stigma attached to it.

As I have told the House before, applications for the minimum income guarantee can be made in writing or over the telephone. It is not necessary to go to the local benefit office to make an application.

Voluntary Sector

13. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on the provision of financial support by his Department to the voluntary sector. [102941]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): Voluntary organisations make an important contribution to helping families and pensioners, and to helping people into work. We are already involving voluntary organisations in the ONE pilots and the new deal, and we are establishing a children's fund to help voluntary organisations to do more to eliminate child poverty.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The rough sleepers initiative set up by the previous Conservative Government was an excellent example of how the private and voluntary sectors can be involved in helping those in our society who are most in need. For example, the Number Five project in Guildford benefited under that initiative. Will the Minister assure the House that this Government will give as much money to the initiative in this Parliament as was provided by the previous Government in the previous Parliament?

Mr. Bayley: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about this matter. The Department of Social Security's resettlement programme assists the voluntary sector to provide more than 4,000 bed spaces in more than 100 organisations. The statutory framework that binds the Department contains no general legal power to provide support to voluntary bodies. However, given that constraint, we will do all that we can to assist voluntary bodies.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Does my hon. Friend agree that the right people are more likely to receive the right benefit to which they are entitled if they are well advised? In particular, I refer to disabled people, so would my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the work carried out by local DIAL—disablement information and advice line—organisations? Does he also recognise that such organisations often struggle on from year to year unsure about local authority grants and lottery applications? Will he consider how he can further help such organisations to carry out their valuable work?

Mr. Bayley: I agree very much with my hon. Friend that the advice that voluntary bodies give to disabled people about their benefit entitlement is an extremely important part of the benefits process. As I said earlier, the Department of Social Security has no general legal power to help voluntary bodies. Other Departments have such general powers and they include the Department of Health, which puts more than £50 million into grants for voluntary bodies through its two main programmes which support such organisations.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Following what my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) said about rough sleepers, is the Minister satisfied that enough is being done to tackle the problem given that, to the untrained eye, there seems to be no obvious diminution in the number of people sleeping rough? During the period of the previous Government, the media made a great deal of rightful protest about that problem, but they are strangely rather silent about it now.

Mr. Bayley: The Government took, particularly over the Christmas period, a series of new initiatives to expand the support that we give for people, both inside and outside London, who are homeless and roofless. Such initiatives are part of the Government's overall strategy to tackle the problems faced by the poor.

Child Support Agency

16. **Dr. Nick Palmer** (Broxtowe): If the Government will accelerate the transition of CSA cases to the new system as soon as possible. [102946]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): We want to introduce the new scheme as quickly as we can, but we have to be careful not to repeat the mistakes of the previous scheme, which failed because it was introduced too quickly. By 2001, there will be 1 million cases on the CSA's books. Transferring them to the new scheme will be a major task that will need very careful preparation.

Dr. Palmer: I warmly support the Government's view on this matter. It is vital that we do not have a new catastrophe to match the one that was introduced by the previous Government with the CSA. However, many of my constituents, who are particularly enthusiastic about the reform, regret the fact that, even when a case has been transferred to the new system in perhaps three or four years' time, the adjustment to the new figure—whatever that may be—will be at the fairly leisurely rate of £5 a year. That means that many people who are now in the system will not benefit to any significant extent before their children grow up. Will my hon. Friend have another look at the matter?

Angela Eagle: We have had a very close look at all these difficult issues in the White Paper that preceded the Bill and in the Green Paper consultation that preceded that. They are difficult issues, and there is always a balance to be struck. The Government believe that they have struck the right balance by knowing that they can prudently get the system into place effectively and by warning people sufficiently about it. Many people at either end of the system are bound to feel that it is not fair, but we are being as fair and as open as we can be, and we consulted as many people as we could. I believe that we have reached a general agreement that our way forward is correct, but, as always, we shall listen.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Under the new system, how many parents will see their entitlement to maintenance reduced and by how much?

Angela Eagle: The Opposition keep carping on about that, but the fact is that entitlement to maintenance under the new system and getting paid are two very different things. We have always taken the view, in the Green Paper and the White Paper, that it is good for everyone if people receive and are actually paid smaller sums of money instead of receiving theoretical payments.

Benefit Reform

18. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will report progress on achieving reforms in welfare benefits. [102948]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): We are reforming the welfare system to eradicate child poverty by creating opportunity for all. The working families tax credit, together with the minimum wage and other measures, will lift 1.25 million people, including 800,000 children, out of poverty.

Seven million families will benefit from the highest-ever rise in child benefit. One and a half million pensioner households are benefiting from the minimum income guarantee, which means £10 a week more for single pensioners and £15 a week more for couples.

The new deal has already helped more than 200,000 people move off benefits and into work.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am grateful for that report of progress. Will the Minister confirm that, according to the definitive measurements that his party supported in opposition, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened in the past 30 months? If he claims that it has not, will he publish the figures that would prove his assertion?

Mr. Rooker: I am grateful for the first part of the hon. Gentleman's remarks. I gave only a partial report—I could spend the rest of the day detailing the successes of our welfare reforms. The hon. Gentleman's point is correct and has been raised before. It is based on research and evidence that predate the Government coming to power. As everyone knows, we freely entered into a contract with the electorate to accept the spending limits imposed by the previous Government for the first two years. That has consequences, which we all understand. In September we published "Opportunity for All", the first-ever national audit of poverty in Britain by any Government. We will produce a report each and every year, so that we can be judged against the standards in that report and, in due course, we will alter the figures that the hon. Gentleman quotes.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): My right hon. Friend will be aware that some of us would have been happier if he had junked the figures agreed with the Opposition much earlier. Although the Government have produced some positive and useful results, will my right hon. Friend give me one undertaking? There have been a number of cases recently in which the detail of various benefit arrangements has been incorrect. It would be helpful if we could guarantee in future that all the calculations coming from the Department were as accurate as possible. Although human beings always make errors, in these matters errors can have devastating effects for the people in receipt of the benefit concerned.

Mr. Rooker: I can only answer yes. If my hon. Friend has particular examples, I will be pleased to look into them. We are endeavouring to take error out of the system by getting the calculations right at the beginning. It is better for people to get the lawful rights to which the House has agreed that they are entitled, and it helps us to stamp out error and fraud. We have a programme to get the figures right at the outset, and if there are specific problems, I will be happy to look into them for my hon. Friend.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will the Minister confirm that, with the introduction of the working families tax credit, the number of households with children that are dependent on means-tested benefits and tax credits will rise; that, where the working families tax credit is combined with housing benefit, the net taper of tax and benefit withdrawal will be 89 per cent.; and that that must

lead in the long run to large numbers of households having no incentive to better themselves—the very reason why the WFTC was abolished in Canada recently?

Mr. Rooker: As we say from the Front Bench, that was a very good point. It does not alter the fact that 1.25 million people—800,000 of them children—have been lifted out of poverty as a result of the working families tax credit and the national minimum wage. We have arranged matters so that it is no longer possible for people to say that it does not pay to work and that it pays to stay on benefit. We have reversed that position, which must be wholly good for both the country and the individuals concerned.

Incapacity Benefit

19. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What representations he has received from organisations representing the disabled on the operation of incapacity benefit. [102949]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): We regularly receive representations about benefits from organisations representing disabled people, including on matters relating to incapacity benefit.

Mr. Dalyell: Albeit that the Government have—rightly or wrongly—got their way on incapacity benefit, do they recognise that the controversy has not gone away? Problems remain. Would it not be a good idea if, in a year or 15 months, there were a formal review of what was taking place, with formal evidence requested from the disability groups that are still so uncertain as to what is happening?

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend knows that the process by which legislation is made by the House is one of debate and amendment, and the Government did indeed listen to voluntary bodies, hon. Members and Members in another place, and changed our proposals on incapacity benefit in several ways. The final amendments raised the disregard for occupational pensions from £50 to £85, and extended from two to three years the period during which people could pay the qualifying national insurance contributions.

When the Government published our strategy to combat poverty last autumn, that was widely welcomed, but we will not achieve our aim of dramatically reducing poverty and, in particular, of eliminating child poverty, unless we make it a priority to give more help to the poorest. That, of course, is what our disability benefit reforms are doing by increasing by up to £26 a week the benefits for people who are born severely disabled or who are so severely disabled early in life that they never have the opportunity to earn and pay national insurance contributions or to contribute to an occupational pension. They are the poorest, and they must be the priority.

Influenza

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): With permission, Madam Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the outbreak of influenza that is gripping the country and the impact that it is having on NHS services.

As the House will be aware, the past few weeks have seen a particular strain of influenza—Sydney A—affecting thousands of people in all parts of the country. According to the Public Health Laboratory Service, which monitors the incidence of flu, it has been rising in all regions over recent weeks. The worst-affected regions to date have been the north and central. Nationally in early December, the numbers of people consulting their GP for the first time with flu-like symptoms stood at 40 per 100,000 of population. Today, I can tell the House that the latest provisional figure has more than quadrupled to 197 per 100,000.

The chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, has advised me that the official figures reflect only the people who have consulted their doctor and undoubtedly understate the true size of the outbreak. That is because heavy usage of the new service, NHS Direct, and the number of patients going to the pharmacist mean that many patients will not show up on the conventional GP-based tracking system.

The previous highest levels of influenza since monitoring began were in 1968–69 and 1989–90. The CMO believes that the present epidemic will not reach those levels, but he considers that there are people missing from official statistics, because instead of consulting their GP, they have used alternative routes of advice. That means that unless present levels of influenza activity peak very soon, we could be heading for the worst epidemic in the past decade.

That certainly chimes with most people's experiences. There can hardly be a family in the land that has not been affected by the flu. Everybody knows somebody who has had it. People also know that it is particularly severe in its effects. Professor Brian Duerden, deputy director of the PHLS, says that

"it is a more prolonged illness, at 10 to 12 days before people start to feel better rather than four or five."

The epidemic is also having a particular impact on elderly people, some of whom have developed serious complications such as bronchitis and pneumonia. In addition to influenza, other viruses such as respiratory syncytial virus—RSV—are contributing to acute respiratory illness. I am advised that RSV illness is at its peak at present. Emergency admissions to hospital have increased as a result: there have been more than 200,000 such admissions to hospitals in the past three weeks alone, and there has been an increase of almost 30 per cent. in the past two months. The evidence that we are receiving from hospitals is that the patients who are being admitted are more ill than normal and are staying longer than normal.

The serious flu outbreak has placed additional strain on local health services in many parts of the country. In the past three weeks, the number of people attending hospital accident and emergency departments has risen to more than 600,000. There have been 250,000 calls to ambulance services—an increase of almost one third on last year—and a similar number of calls to NHS Direct over the past three weeks, many flu-related. According to Professor Mike Pringle, chairman of the Royal College of General Practitioners, over the millennium, GP co-operatives had 50 per cent. more calls than last year, mainly owing to the flu.

Those figures clearly demonstrate that the flu outbreak has put real pressure on NHS services—there is no doubt about that. Equally, the evidence suggests that the NHS is dealing with those pressures. All acute hospitals throughout the country have remained open throughout the winter period. Of course, both GP surgeries and hospitals have been extremely busy.

The highest priority is being given to patients who are the most seriously ill. As is usual, and as had been planned, most hospitals have undertaken little routine elective surgery over the past few weeks so as to be able to concentrate their efforts on emergency cases. The number of emergency admissions remained unusually high last week because of the flu outbreak, and many hospitals that had planned to start surgery today have decided to delay until the immediate emergency pressures subside. Hospital managers and clinicians will judge how best to balance their work load in the light of local experience over the next few weeks.

That approach represents a sensible deployment of NHS staff and resources, allowing the health service to cope with the surge in emergency demand that the flu outbreak has brought. Thanks to the staff who run critical care services, they, too, are coping with the demands being placed on them, despite the fact that intensive care is under real pressure. About half the patients being admitted to intensive care have flu or flu-like illnesses, sometimes resulting in pneumonia and—less commonly—in septicaemia, leading to multiple organ failure.

This year, the Government have provided a record number of intensive care and high-dependency beds. We have worked closely with the Intensive Care Society to plan critical care facilities in hospitals. Patients who need acute and critical care are being looked after. There has been an increase of 100 critical care beds this year and, in the face of exceptional demand, staff and facilities are being used flexibly to ensure that patients receive the care that they need. Staff are doing an excellent job in difficult circumstances.

The number of beds available fluctuates by the hour, but I can tell the House that, as of mid-morning today, there were 22 beds available. However, local surges in demand arising as the flu moves around the country will continue to place particular pressures on critical care facilities. Where appropriate, local NHS hospitals have made arrangements with local independent hospitals for critical care. If transfers between intensive care units are required as a last resort, the chief executives of NHS trusts have been asked to ensure that the arrangements run smoothly and that clinical staff are given as much support as possible.

The influenza outbreak has put great pressure on the NHS, but the NHS is coping. As the chairman of the British Medical Association, Dr. Ian Bogle, said earlier today:

"all parts of the NHS have been put under pressure but doctors and nurses are coping well from GP services to intensive care. The incidence of new cases of flu is uneven but wherever it is occurring it is a particularly nasty strain. Thanks to the high level of planning across the country we are coping".

[Mr. Alan Milburn]

Of course the NHS is under severe pressure. Winter is always the busiest time of year for the national health service; in addition, this winter, the NHS and social services have had to deal with the special pressures brought by the extended millennium period.

That is why planning for this winter began earlier than ever. Local winter planning groups were established in April last year in every part of England to co-ordinate the planning and provision of health and social services over the winter and millennium period. Each group includes health authorities, social services, NHS trusts, primary care groups, out-of-hours and deputising services, NHS Direct, police and fire services, community health councils, other local authority departments, and, of course, the voluntary and private sector.

Each local group submitted its plans for dealing with winter pressures by the end of September 1999. They were followed by visits from the Department of Health's millennium executive team to ensure the robustness of the plans. We have extended the capacity of local health services to deal with winter pressures. Extra beds have been provided, and over the millennium period, for example, 45 per cent. more ambulance staff than the year before were on duty.

Winter planning has also included a major public information campaign. Its aim has been to encourage the public to use the most appropriate service for their needs—the local pharmacy and NHS Direct or, indeed, self-care—as a complement to GP or hospital services. The campaign was backed by the BMA, the Royal College of Nursing and the Patients Association, among others. All the evidence that we have received to date suggests that the public have responded positively to the campaign by recognising that health services should be used appropriately and responsibly.

The campaign was also supported by a large increase in flu vaccinations made available to the public through family doctors. Flu vaccine can never eradicate flu, but it can help to provide further protection for vulnerable groups. This winter, 8.6 million doses of influenza vaccine were made available: 1 million up on last year. We do not as yet have uptake levels for flu vaccine this year, but we will review them when they become available. In the meantime, I have asked the chief medical officer to consider ways of enhancing uptake in future. Increased use of computerised call-up systems is one possibility.

Over the past few weeks, the NHS has risen to the challenges that it has faced. That is not to say that services are not stretched: they are. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to NHS and social services staff for making sure that services have been there for people when they need them. I hope that the House will want to join me in thanking them for their efforts over Christmas, the millennium and now into the new year.

Health service staff have done a magnificent job and I know that the whole country is grateful to them. They are up against a serious flu outbreak, but I have every confidence that they will go on delivering care for patients where and when they need it.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement and for giving us a copy in advance. It is long on complacency and short on detail and substance. Many people will have voted new Labour because of the Prime Minister's promises about the health services. How hollow those promises sound now. Those voters must feel betrayed.

I am happy to join the Secretary of State in praising health service staff. I have been one of the health service staff who had to deal with flu outbreaks in the past. However, first-class staff work in an increasingly second-class service, thanks to second-class Ministers.

We may have a flu epidemic—it is hard to get decent information from the Government about what constitutes an epidemic. When considering statistics, there is no truth or untruth with this Government: simply convenience and inconvenience. People in this country are asking how, in the world's fifth biggest economy at the beginning of the 21st century, an illness as predictable, cyclical and common as flu can cause the system to break apart at the seams.

The Secretary of State admits that no elective work has been done in the past week. If the health service had been doing its normal work, it would have fallen apart completely. What faith can we have, in view of the Secretary of State's attitude? When we see sick patients left to die in waiting rooms, waiting in car parks to be seen or stored in converted operating theatres, and when the Secretary of State can say something as complacent as, "The NHS is coping tremendously well," we wonder whether the only isolation unit in this country that is operating is the one that he keeps himself in so that he cannot see the complete picture. NHS staff are coping tremendously well, but they are being badly let down by those who run the service.

The Secretary of State has to answer several points today. Too many beds, especially non-acute and respite care beds, have been lost. How many beds have been lost in the health service since Labour came to power? How many extra beds does he estimate will be needed in the coming months if there is a proper flu epidemic? There are too few intensive care beds. I was warned by a consultant six weeks ago that that represented an impending crisis. Ministers presumably got the same information. What did they do? What plans have been made in the past two months for extra intensive care beds; and what measures were they putting in place, knowing that this was coming? It is also true that the Government's obsession with their waiting list initiative has left the service overstretched and with too little spare capacity to deal with any crisis, including this one.

The Government's dogmatic hatred of the private sector instinctively leads them away from co-operation. Only last week, the Secretary of State was saying that NHS patients would not be treated in the private sector. Now he tells us that they will. Their dogma is put ahead of patients' interests. Will he tell us clearly now whether he will guarantee that no trust will be penalised this month for failing to meet its waiting list targets because of action that it may take to deal with the flu epidemic?

More importantly, in the longer term, will the Government look at a better immunisation programme—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State seems to think that funny. Will they look at a better immunisation programme for the over-75s to make sure that the sort of deadly morbidity of this year is not repeated? What specific measures will the Government take? If they suggest a good immunisation programme, we shall support them.

Will the Secretary of State also please review the decision not to make Relenza available on prescription? That false economy, with the huge cost to British industry—an estimated £6 billion to £8 billion, compared with the £100 million for Relenza—shows what a shabby mechanism the National Institute for Clinical Excellence could be: people can improve their chance of survival by buying Relenza if they can afford it, but cannot get it if they are old or needy. That is the reality of Labour's health policy.

There are three truths that we have to accept: we no longer have the best health care system in the world, the health service cannot do everything—we must not pretend that it can—and the NHS on its own, as currently funded, cannot provide the health care that we need and deserve in this country at the beginning of the 21st century. We need a Government who take a full assessment of the failings of the NHS, who are willing to recognise the reality of the situation that we are in, who will avoid the complacency that we have heard today, and who will increase the total resources across the board for health care in this country.

The Government are failing patients, but worse, they are betraying the trust that the people of this country put in them.

Mr. Milburn: I welcome the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) back from his holidays. Indeed, I welcome him back to the country, which, in his absence, has seen the staff of the national health service coping with a very serious flu outbreak.

Let me deal with the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised one by one. As far as cuts in the number of beds are concerned, if I were he, I would be extremely wary of getting into that territory. Let us not forget that the Conservative Government, during their last 10 years in office alone, managed to cut 40,000 hospital beds—but the Conservatives now have the temerity to complain that there are not enough hospital beds in the NHS.

The hon. Gentleman asked about intensive care. If he had listened to the statement—indeed, if he had read it, as I made it available to him in advance—he would know that we listened carefully to what intensive care doctors and nurses were saying to us. They said that, on the evidence of last year, we needed additional intensive care and high dependency beds. We have provided them: an extra 100 critical care beds were made available to the NHS last year and I am pleased that we did that, given this serious outbreak of flu.

As for the use of private sector beds, I have never said that the national health service would not co-operate with the private sector when it is appropriate to do so. There is nothing to prevent local NHS hospitals from using capacity in the independent sector locally. Some have done so, especially in hard-pressed areas such as London.

Making ideological points cannot mask the facts. It is overwhelmingly the case that the national health service has better intensive care facilities than the private sector, for the simple reason that NHS hospitals are able to provide 24-hour medical cover. Private sector hospitals are not usually able to do that. That is why, this winter, the national health service has taken requests from private sector hospitals to admit private sector patients to NHS critical care facilities. We shall of course continue to do that when it is appropriate. Some estimates show that up to 1,000 patients a year are shifted by private hospitals into NHS intensive care units precisely because the private sector has not been able to cope with the complications that have arisen.

On the issue of Relenza, I do not know where the hon. Member for Woodspring takes his advice from—presumably from the marketing departments of pharmaceutical companies. We take our advice from expert clinicians. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which is staffed by a dozen professors of medicine, gave us clear advice that Relenza was not right on clinical effectiveness grounds. However, NICE is working with the drugs company to see whether Relenza could be made available in the future. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] There is nothing new in that. I know that the sheep are baaing early this year, but that was made clear when we made the announcement on Relenza.

What is depressing about the hon. Gentleman's response to my statement is that it is so predictable. I know that it suits Conservative Members to talk down the incidence of flu in order to talk up the problems in the national health service, but the truth is that the Conservative party is out of kilter with the British people on this issue. The public—each and every family in the land—know that the national health service is dealing and coping with a serious outbreak of flu. While the staff of the national health service are busy coping, the best that the Conservatives can do is to carry on carping.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the attack on the National Institute for Clinical Excellence is an attack on some of the most eminent clinicians in the health service? The ideology coming from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman shows that he should take some sound advice.

How many people were immunised against flu last year to try to prevent their being affected? If expenditure had remained as it was under the previous Government, how many, if any, of the extra 100 critical beds would have been available in the national health service to cope with this problem?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As he rightly says, Conservative Members are always urging the Government to take difficult decisions to prioritise health services but, when we take those difficult decisions, they criticise them.

As I explained, we have increased the doses of vaccination available through GPs' surgeries. We do not yet have the figures on uptake rates, but we shall review them when we get them. We know that we probably need to do more to encourage uptake, and I have asked the chief medical officer to report to me on the best way of doing that in the future.

My hon. Friend is on to a very good point about the funding of the national health service. The Conservatives claim that there are not enough hospital beds and there is insufficient funding for the NHS. The Conservative party is the very party that, when we announced our record cash injection into the national health service, described the extra funding as reckless, mad and irresponsible.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The Secretary of State was right to thank NHS staff for trying to cope with the current problems, but he came to the

[Mr. Matthew Taylor]

Dispatch Box to suggest that all was well, and those staff know that all is not well. Patients, especially those who have been carted around the country in search of beds, know that all is not well; and those who are in the areas where there are no beds for sufferers are very much aware that all is not well.

The Secretary of State likes to speak of critical care beds. Will he clarify the position relating to funded intensive care beds? In September, he conducted a survey to establish the numbers of both intensive care and high dependency beds, and he has put those figures together. What is the number of intensive care beds? The Intensive Care Society, to which we spoke today, did not know the answer, and feared that the number of funded beds might have fallen.

The fact is that the overall difficulty experienced by the NHS results from a lack of flexibility. It lacks the resources to cope with a peak demand of this sort, even at its current level, which has not yet exceeded that of last year: the graph is still the same. Is it not a fact that, so far, the NHS has not turned the corner, following 18 years of misrule by the Conservative party—years that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) tried so conveniently to forget?

Having moved from the Treasury to the Department of Health, does the Secretary of State now regret his former team's decision to introduce a 1p cut in income tax while the NHS was still clearly underfunded, and was still experiencing the difficulties of the Conservative years?

Mr. Milburn: Let me issue a small health warning to the hon. Gentleman. Before quoting figures relating to money, he should consult his own party's manifesto for the last general election, which makes interesting reading. The Liberal Democrats promised an injection of an extra £500 million a year for the NHS—a pittance by comparison with the extra money that the present Government have invested in it.

The hon. Gentleman made a more serious and substantive point about the number of intensive care beds. He was right to say that the last Government did not even know how many such beds were available in our hospitals. That is why we instituted a census to establish the number; the results will be published shortly. The extra 100 critical care beds are a mixture of intensive care and high dependency beds. As I speak, we have approximately 1,570 intensive care beds and 800 high dependency beds.

Ms Ann Coffey (Stockport): Last Friday, I visited Stepping Hill, my local hospital. I am pleased to say that, despite a record number of emergency referrals to casualty over the past two weeks, there were no unacceptably long trolley waits and no ambulances stacked outside, and beds and treatment were available to all who needed them. That visit was in marked contrast to my visit to the same hospital at Christmas in 1997, when there were a record number of trolley waits, stacked ambulances and a lack of beds throughout the region. Of course, the Conservative party was in power at the time. [HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] It all seems such a long time ago.

One reason why the problem has been managed so much better this Christmas is the fact that there has been much better planning, along with co-operation with general practices and community services and a great deal of commitment on the part of staff at the hospital. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating those staff on managing this Christmas crisis?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I should like to remind the House that it is question time, not statement time, so will Members please put questions to the Secretary of State, not compliments?

Mr. Milburn: With regard to the recollections of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey), time certainly flies when you are enjoying yourself, Madam Speaker. What she says about the position this year is right. It is borne out by what many senior clinicians and managers have been telling us—that the NHS is better prepared and planned than ever before. I have been particularly pleased to see a high level of co-operation in many areas, including her own, between the NHS and social services. Not too long ago, the NHS and social services viewed each other as enemies on opposite sides of the fence. It is heartening that, on the ground, they now co-operate. That can only be to the benefit of patients.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): The Secretary of State will know about the tragic death last week of my constituent Mr. Harold Smith of Ross-on-Wye, who died in a bed in Bridgend after being moved from Herefordshire because no intensive care beds were available. I am sure that the whole House will join me in sending condolences. The internal investigation is under way, but can the Secretary of State tell the House whether the flu crisis caused the lack of beds in Herefordshire which caused Mr. Smith to be moved?

Herefordshire has gained one more intensive care bed since the Government came to power, but what will the effect be on the new hospital that is being built in Hereford—the number of beds will be cut from around 400 to just 250 by 2005? Will the Secretary of State assure the House that that number will be sufficient to deal with any influenza crisis? Will he assure me that he will review the position to ensure that such a tragedy does not happen again?

Mr. Milburn: May I give the hon. Gentleman that assurance and pass on my condolences to the family of Mr. Smith? As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, an internal inquiry is taking place. That is due to report shortly. I do not want to pre-empt it, but I understand that human error is the most likely cause of the tragedy.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have provided extra hospital intensive care facilities since we came to office. I know that he lobbied extremely assiduously and successfully for a new hospital, which is being built through the private finance initiative. It might help him to know that we are making available additional capacity for up to two extra intensive treatment or high dependency beds. In preparation for the new hospital, further ITU nurse training will be undertaken during the next financial year.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): The people should know that influenza injections work. I have had one each year for the past three years and I have not

had flu for three years. It is the same for people throughout the country who have had the injections. However, a problem arises with some groups of people: they fear the needle. The injection is painless; it is a couple of pin pricks. That may seem of little importance to Members, but to people outside who face the prospect of injection, it is important. They should feel absolutely reassured.

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that sensible advice. It is good advice. We and the chief medical officer continue to encourage people, particularly the vulnerable and those in at-risk groups such as the elderly, even now to go to their family doctor and to be vaccinated against the flu. It is not too late; and it is a sensible action. I hope that many elderly people and others at risk, such as those with chest and respiratory problems, will consider doing so.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I visited the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother hospital, Margate this morning. I found it heaving with patients, with admissions being accommodated in day care beds because every other bed was full. I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to staff there and at the Queen Victoria Memorial hospital, Herne Bay, who are doing their best to cope. They tell me that one of the problems that they face is a lack of staff not only through long-term staff shortages, but through sickness too. We have heard much about the flu vaccine. How many people in the NHS—not just medical staff but ancillary staff—have been offered and have taken up the vaccine?

Mr. Milburn: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the staff at his local hospital. As I said in my statement, we acknowledge that the NHS, particularly in the acute sector, is extremely busy and that staff are doing a quite remarkable job. I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the actual numbers on staff flu vaccination, but I can tell him that, this year, for the first time, we made flu vaccination available to NHS staff. Although that was a sensible precaution, it has not proved to be successful in every case, and there have been quite high levels of staff sickness. Nevertheless—although not every NHS staff member decided to heed the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours)—I have no doubt that staff vaccination has had an impact.

Hon. Members will know that the current flu bug is particularly nasty; that it affects NHS staff just as it affects everyone else; and that not only hospitals, but schools and businesses across the country are being affected by it. Nevertheless, the views expressed by the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) were sensible, and we shall seek to learn lessons from this year, and to determine whether, next year, we can vaccinate even more NHS staff members against the flu.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): Is it not depressing that there are people around who find it impossible to talk about any issue at all without turning it into a political game? When even an influenza epidemic has to become a political football, is it surprising that the people who engage in such games are not household names even in their own households?

Will the Secretary of State clarify one matter? I speak from self-interest—like my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours), as a recipient of the flu jab—and am not clear whether the strain of flu that I was immunised against is the strain that is sweeping the land. Is it, or is it not?

Mr. Milburn: Yes.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): In view of what the Secretary of State said about the need for immunisation, what would he say to Mrs. Wheddon, of Watton, in my constituency, who rang me this afternoon and said that, today, on the media, she had heard a health service spokesman say that people should go to be vaccinated? She rang up her local surgery and was told that—although she suffers from emphysema—no vaccine was available, and that they thought that there was a shortage of it across the country.

Subsequently, I rang my general practitioner, in Yorkshire, and asked whether—as the Secretary of State recommends—I could have a flu vaccination, but was told that he had no flu vaccine. I pointed out that the other surgery had said that there was a national shortage of flu vaccine, and asked whether that was the case. I was told, "We are going to get some more, but only a very limited quantity, and we will put you on a waiting list."

Does the Secretary of State agree that the current situation demonstrates that the Government were completely unprepared for a flu epidemic, and that spin will not solve Mrs. Wheddon's problem?

Mr. Milburn: Tediously predictable, as usual.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Could anyone be tediously predictable as not usual?

Mr. Milburn: That is a very good point. It is good to see that the hon. Gentlemen has—perhaps; we shall see—recovered from his Christmas break.

I should be very glad to investigate local problems with the availability of flu vaccination. As far as I am aware, however, there is no local shortage of vaccine. Indeed, although the accusation made by Opposition spokesmen has been that we have not made flu vaccine available, we have in fact been providing it to family doctors. I see the hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend) nodding.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that, last year, the current Government became the first one to make available flu vaccination to all members of vulnerable groups, such as over-75s. We reversed the previous position, as that was the sensible course of action to take. We shall, of course, learn from this year, and we shall improve on it. However, it is simply not the case that people generally have not been receiving a flu vaccination if they need one.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): My local hospital, Wexham Park, like that of other hon. Members, is admitting twice as many people as it usually does. It is coping because doctors and nurses are working very hard indeed, for which I pay tribute to them.

Two issues arise. First, many hospital registrars are facing examinations, on which they are working very hard, and hospital management will have to provide them with study time to cope with that pressure. Is any action being taken centrally to help local hospital trusts address that issue?

[Fiona Mactaggart]

Secondly, some of the cancelled elective surgery was cancer surgery. Some local people are scared because we are not meeting the swift times that we have introduced for cancer surgery. As the crisis diminishes, will my right hon. Friend encourage hospital trusts to make those operations a high priority? Some people who have had to have their time changed for inevitable managerial reasons will need to be dealt with urgently when it becomes possible.

Mr. Milburn: I shall give my hon. Friend and her constituents that assurance. We have continually reiterated that treatment on the national health service should be according to clinical urgency as well as clinical need. That has always been the position. Of course hospitals are hard pressed at the moment. Some are having to cancel routine elective surgery. As the pressures diminish, I expect the national health service and local hospitals to get back on track and start to treat patients according to the urgency of their conditions. That is the appropriate thing to do, and it is what the national health service has been doing.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Does the Secretary of State accept that, to justify his assertion that the figures of the Royal College of General Practitioners for a flu epidemic—which show a typical year, not an atypical year—are wrong, the Government need to publish data from NHS Direct or elsewhere? If not, he runs the danger of the chief medical officer appearing to be a political football—a subject just referred to by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright).

I worked in my local casualty department over the millennium. Does the Secretary of State accept that NHS staff want more money for the health service? They recognise that the disease afflicting the NHS is a contagious one caught by the Government from the Tories. It involves their spending pre-election war chests on tax bribes rather than on NHS services. Does he accept that to blame a microbe for the problems of the NHS, when the real problem is years of underfunding which the Government have continued, does a disservice to the people working in the health service?

Mr. Milburn: No, I do not accept that. The Government are giving the NHS a record cash injection. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would welcome that. As the economy grows, the national health service can grow. I am determined to ensure sustained and sustainable increases in funding for the NHS, not just this year, next year and the following year, but in the years after.

The hon. Gentleman's first point was a decent and substantive one. We are into a new ball game. The chief medical officer is looking again at the advice that we have received from the PHLS, because we have listened carefully to clinicians and managers, who have told us over the past three or four weeks that the official figures dramatically understated the range of demand in hospital accident and emergency departments and in GP surgeries. The evidence on the number of people who have been to the pharmacist and bought cold and flu remedies from major outlets such as Boots the Chemist, as well as those phoning NHS Direct, shows that many people have heeded the chief medical officer's sensible advice that the best way to deal with the flu is to take care and stay at home.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I spent part of my millennium break helping to treat the flu epidemic and vaccinate those at risk. My local health trust in Dartford and Gravesham has coped very well. It has increased the number of intensive care beds by 50 per cent. to cope with the difficulty. One of the trust's main problems has been a shortage of highly trained specialist nurses to manage those beds. When does my right hon. Friend predict that the Government's new nurse recruitment and training programme will start to roll out such highly qualified and dedicated nurses into our wards and intensive care units, so that we no longer encounter critical problems every year caused by a lack of nurses?

Mr. Milburn: As my hon. Friend knows, we aim to recruit up to an extra 15,000 nurses to the national health service over the next few years. We are making good progress on that. So far, around 4,000 nurses have returned to the national health service or returned to training as a result of the recruitment campaign initiated by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). That is beginning to take effect.

More optimistically for the longer term, I can tell my hon. Friend that the number of applications this year for nurse training courses in colleges is double the previous year's. That is a good sign. We know that there are problems with particular specialties which have come about as a direct consequence of the fact that the previous Government cut not only the number of nurses, but—even more short-sightedly—the number of nurses in training. We are beginning to make up that lost ground. It will take time, but we are seeing nurses come back to the NHS.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): Does the Secretary of State have the honesty and the courage to admit that, compared with other developed countries, the resources in this country made available to the health service, private and public, are massively underfunded?

Mr. Milburn: As I told the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris), I want to see sustained increases in investment in the NHS—this year, next year and in the years that follow. By the end of this Parliament, for the first time ever, spending on the NHS will have risen to more than 6 per cent. of gross domestic product.

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): I am a great supporter of NHS Direct—I could be accused of using it as a political football—which was introduced by the Labour Government. Is my right hon. Friend as pleased as I am by the valuable contribution that it has made during the influenza outbreak? Will he issue statistics on how many calls to NHS Direct concern flu-related symptoms? Is there any way of estimating how many of those people chose NHS Direct rather than presenting themselves to GPs or accident and emergency departments, which would have added to the stresses and strains?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right. NHS Direct, described by the Tory party as a gimmick, has proved its worth and its mettle over the millennium period. It has

taken almost 250,000 calls, many of which have been related directly to flu. Early evidence suggests that NHS Direct is referring about one third of those who ring up to more appropriate and less intensive forms of care than they envisaged when they made the phone call. In other words, people who might have expected to turn up at their GP's surgery, to call the family doctor out of hours, or to turn up at the local casualty department are instead looking after themselves and their families at home where that is the safe thing to do. NHS Direct is a real success story, not least because it is helping patients to get the most appropriate level of care and treatment that they need.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): The Government have been in power for 130 weeks, and the Secretary of State has five Ministers. In that time, no Minister has visited any of the eight constituencies within the West Surrey health authority area. Is that because the authority has lost 111 beds, nurse vacancies are over 300 and accident and emergency trolley waits are the longest in the country? I join the right hon. Gentleman's praise for NHS staff, but does he intend to come and tell those staff that things can only get better, as they have seen a sharp deterioration in the years since his party came to power?

Mr. Milburn: The right hon. Lady takes an active interest in her local health service—particularly the local hospitals—and she has been to see me to express some of her concerns. The question of why no Minister has visited the area is one that I will try to put right for her and for the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn), if she would find that helpful. She should recall that the reasons we have some of the problems in West Surrey are precisely the appalling deficits that the health authority built up when she, I think, was Secretary of State for Health.

BILLS PRESENTED

Hare Coursing

Mr. Harry Cohen, supported by Mr. Gerald Bermingham, Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas and Mr. Colin Pickthall, presented a Bill to make hare coursing illegal: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed [Bill 42].

Recycled Content of Newsprint

Mr. Gordon Prentice, supported by Dr. Doug Naysmith, Mr. Roger Berry, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Mr. Tom Brake, Sir Sydney Chapman, Mr. David Chaytor, Valerie Davey, Ms Julia Drown, Mr. Don Foster and Mrs. Diana Organ, presented a Bill to increase the amount of recycled paper collected and used in newsprint in England and Wales; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed [Bill 43].

GOVERNMENT RESOURCES AND ACCOUNTS BILL

Ordered,

That, during the proceedings on the Government Resources and Accounts Bill, Standing Committee A shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

Orders of the Day

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

4.20 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill draws comprehensively on the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired first by Lord Nolan and now by Lord Neill. I place on record my thanks and, I believe, those of the whole House, for the excellence of the Committee's work, and express our gratitude to its distinguished chairmen and members.

The Bill is an important milestone in the development of our democratic institutions. For the first time, how political parties conduct themselves will be the subject of statutory regulation. Political groupings have been a feature of our parliamentary system of government for more than 300 years, and it has been well over 100 years since Disraeli led the way with the development of mass party organisations to parallel his 1867 extension of the franchise. It is something of a paradox, then, that so little statutory recognition has so far been given to the central role played by political parties in the political life of this country.

Parties are vital to the effective functioning of any representative democracy, but the political parties of today do not simply sustain a particular set of political leaders in office. In any mature democracy, political parties also provide both a crucial link between the citizen and the elected Government of the day and some of the key processes by which that elected Government are held to account.

Parties must be capable of discharging effectively those onerous responsibilities, and that necessarily requires money. Parties can secure funding from one of two basic sources: they can receive a subvention from the state or they can attract funding from their own supporters. The Neill committee recommended against the first of those approaches: a view with which the Government wholeheartedly concur. Indeed, rather than underpinning representative democracy, over-reliance on state funding could in the end undermine it.

Political parties should be the champions of the people, ensuring that the state is their servant and not their master. An over-reliance on state funding could absorb parties into the fabric of the state, thereby putting their own institutional needs and those of the state above the needs of those whom they are elected to represent. The health of our democracy is far better served if parties are principally reliant on their own efforts to secure adequate funding. Such an approach compels parties to engage with their members and supporters.

That engagement between parties and the people must be a reciprocal one. We should celebrate the fact that so many supporters of political parties recognise their civic responsibilities and duties by contributing to their chosen party's financial well-being. Democracy does not come cheap, and those who are able should be ready to dip into their pockets to help to sustain it.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): Why is the Labour party in government

[Mr. Robert Maclennan]

wholeheartedly in support of the arguments against state funding when, as recently as in the consideration of the Houghton committee, it took the opposite view? Is it simply that its power in the land has grown since then, or has some objective reason displaced all its earlier arguments?

Mr. Straw: I am trying to cast my mind back to when the Houghton committee reported: it was not in the past decade or so, and I think that it was in the mid-1980s. Our view on state funding today is fully consistent with the view that we took in 1995, when the Labour party in opposition gave evidence to the then Nolan committee. I remember that, because I had the honour on behalf of my party of drafting the evidence and getting my colleagues' approval for it, as well as giving oral evidence. Parties do sometimes change their minds. On some issues, even I have been known to change my mind, but it happens that, on this and other issues of a constitutional nature, I have not.

The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) and I may reach some agreement on my next point. The Neill committee argued that, if we want such civic engagement as I have mentioned, the state should at least be prepared to give a helping hand by providing tax relief for small donations. On that discrete point, the Government remain unpersuaded of the case for such a scheme but, overall, the controls on campaign expenditure in the Bill will significantly reduce the demands on parties to raise even greater sums of money.

We have also reduced the pressure on political parties by more than doubling the taxpayers' funds available to Opposition parties. Such is the generous spirit that we have brought to government that the subvention of state aid to the Liberal Democrats has increased by a factor of three and the Conservatives now receive more than £3 million of state funding to help them to make their opposition effective.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): It has not done them much good.

Mr. Straw: We are also interested in best value—as is the Conservative party—and it remains to be seen whether the Audit Commission will feel the need to scrutinise whether the Conservatives have used that £3 million to good advantage. Certainly, I make no complaints about the state of the Opposition. Long may they continue in the same way. Of course I say that in jest.

At the heart of the Bill's provisions is the need to ensure that the funding of political parties is open and transparent. Greater transparency will not only strengthen the accountability of political parties but help to buttress their financial standing. The secrecy that has hitherto been permitted to political parties in their funding, and the scandals to which such secrecy has given rise in recent years, have undoubtedly left a sour taste. In contrast, all political parties—and the reputation of our political system as a whole—will benefit from the Bill.

The Neill committee also recognised that, in order to restore public confidence in the political process, it was important to put an end to what the committee termed the "arms race" in election spending. Campaign spending at a national level by the two main parties has increased from an average of £5 million in 1983 to £27 million in 1997. If we took no action, those sums could easily exceed £30 million for each party at the next general election. The perceived need to match, if not exceed, spending by the other side has put a tremendous burden on the parties. Such pressure could lead a party to an unhealthy reliance on a handful of wealthy donors, and that would plainly not be good for democracy.

The new arrangements also introduce controls on spending at a national level as well as a local one, for the first time. Our Victorian forebears, when faced with growing electoral abuse, introduced the Secret Ballot Act 1872 and the Corrupt Practices Act 1883 to stamp out the buying and selling of votes, something that was done brazenly at that time.

Compared with today, elections were fought on a very different basis in the latter part of the 19th century. In the days before a national press and the broadcast media, the electoral battleground was in individual constituencies. Indeed, elections took place on different days over some time, and it was common for leading figures, including Gladstone, to stand for election in two, three or more constituencies and then make their choice according to the sessional orders—with great celebration if they were lucky enough to have been returned for two or more constituencies. Although the campaign took place at a local level and hardly at all at a national level—it was only events such as Gladstone's famous Midlothian campaign that saw the beginnings of national campaigning—and even after controls were introduced, vast sums by today's standards were deployed in an attempt to buy elections. It helps to put current levels of campaign spending into some historical perspective to learn that, at the 1880 general election, after controls were introduced, candidates spent the equivalent of £106 million at 1997 prices, but they spent it at a local, not a national, level.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am sure that the House has listened to the right hon. Gentleman's historical exegesis with great interest. If he is against the purchase of votes, how does he justify promoting a Bill that will allow the issue by Ministers of official press releases in support, for example, of the abolition of our national currency, while regulating the activities of campaigning organisations in any such referendum for up to six months, thereby preventing the supporters of national self-government from effectively arguing their case?

Mr. Straw: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says. I have sought to ensure that the spirit, as well as the letter, of the Neill committee's recommendations on referendums is introduced into the Bill. If, as I think, the hon. Gentleman is referring to the fact that controls on campaign spending in a referendum can go back six months, but that the purdah period for Government is 28 days, that is no different from the situation on general elections that obtained under the previous Government as well as this one. I think that there is general agreement that, once the provisions are fully in force, the spending rules should cover the year before a general election. However, we have sought to replicate the purdah period that exists before a general election—when officials cannot get involved in the policy of the Government of

the day except in narrowly controlled circumstances—to apply to referendum campaigns, but obviously taking account of the differences. I shall shortly speak in more detail about the changes to referendums.

Given every other change that has taken place in our national life over the past 120 years, it is astonishing that we still conduct our elections according to rules laid down at the end of the 19th century. They tightly regulate spending by candidates and third parties at a constituency level, but do not recognise even the existence of political parties and third parties at the national level. That is plainly absurd, and the Bill puts the situation right.

Similarly, as the Neill committee recognised, the way in which we conduct referendums has also failed to keep up with the changing political landscape. Neill proposed having standing ground rules in operation, well in advance of any future referendum, so that the debate can concentrate on the issue at stake and not on the conduct of the poll.

Each side in a referendum campaign must have the opportunity fairly to put its case to the electorate. The Bill achieves that by providing for the designation by the Electoral Commission of an umbrella organisation on each side of a campaign. Once designated, the two umbrella bodies will each be entitled to a grant of up to £600,000, a free mailshot to each household and free air time for referendum broadcasts.

In addition, in the 28-day period before the date of the poll, the Government of the day will stand back from the debate and leave it to the umbrella groups and other participants to campaign. This purdah period is a fair and practical response to the Neill committee recommendation, and the committee has welcomed it.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): What does my right hon. Friend have to say about the huge sums of money already being spent on a pre-referendum campaign? Mr. Paul Sykes has said in the *Yorkshire Post* that he is prepared to spend £235 million campaigning against Members of Parliament who believe that our country should be a full player in Europe. He is putting up posters all over the country. Mine has a rather flattering picture of me when younger. Constituents are phoning up asking who is publishing this picture with my name on it.

This is taking place now—millions and million of pounds are being spent to try to get Britain to leave Europe. That must be considered by the Government and the Neill committee.

Mr. Straw: As I shall explain in a moment, it is not possible to achieve perfect equality in spending by both sides in a referendum campaign. I am pleased to learn that my hon. Friend has been portrayed by a picture that suggests that he is even younger than he is.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): But no more lovely.

Mr. Straw: As far as I am aware, I do not even merit a poster from Mr. Sykes in my constituency, still less a photograph. However, that is one of the burdens that I must bear.

I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) that the arrangements for the fair conduct of referendums, in part VII, include one departure from the Neill committee recommendations. That departure has to do with expenditure limits on campaign organisations—a subject of much debate, both in the Neill committee and outside it. The committee said that it was not opposed to expenditure limits as a matter of principle, but it questioned how such limits could be applied effectively in practice. It therefore proposed that there should be no limits on either side.

For a reason that I shall expand on in a moment, the Government agree that it is not practicable to impose an overall limit on the amount that each side in a referendum may spend. In our judgment, such an approach would indeed be unenforceable. It would compel otherwise implacable opponents, who happened to share the same view on a given referendum question, to work together and agree a share-out of the expenditure limit. To expect that to happen is simply not to live in the real world.

It not possible either to construct a regime that automatically produces a level playing field between the two designated umbrella bodies, but that leaves everyone else out in the cold. We know that from the experience in Quebec, where considerable use is made of referendums. There, a 1978 Act introduced an almost total ban on independent spending by individuals or groups operating outside a formal umbrella group or what was called the national committee.

Several sections of that Quebec law were struck down by the Supreme Court of Canada in October 1997, on the grounds that they violated freedom of expression under both the Canadian and the Quebec charters of human rights and freedoms. Any equivalent provisions here would be equally vulnerable to legal challenge under article 10 of the European convention on human rights.

However, I have taken some trouble to talk to colleagues in Canada, and I should also tell the House that the operation of the Quebec law was intolerably complicated. Squabbles took place between participant groups both before and after referendum campaigns about how a fair share-out might be implemented, and about whether it should. In the end, it was accepted in Canada—as I hope that it will be accepted in this House—that such a fair share-out was impossible.

However, it is possible to place limits on the spending of each individual or organisation participating in a referendum. I will be the first to admit that that will not produce absolute equality in terms of what is actually spent in a campaign, any more than the prescription of maximum limits on what parties may spend will secure an equality of what is actually spent in elections by those political parties.

For example, the Liberal Democrats are offered generous spending limits in the Bill, but it is a racing certainty that the party will not be able to raise money to the level of the spending limit. So to argue that spending by the Labour and Liberal Democrats parties will be nearly equal because both parties will be able to spend up to a maximum amount fails to take into account the capacity of parties to raise money up to the maximum.

We have listened to the criticisms levelled against the expenditure limits set out in the draft Bill. I accept that they were too crude and failed to take account of the relative support for political parties as represented in the House. We have refashioned the limits in the Bill, and made them more sensitive to what we perceive to be the level of support for those parties.

[Mr. Straw]

I also say, particularly to Conservative Members, that the revised expenditure limits set out in the Bill are not necessarily our last word on the matter. We remain open to argument if better, more workable proposals can be introduced. I have to say—I do not say this with any arrogance—that, so far, I have not seen any better and more workable alternatives than those in the Bill. I have asked the Opposition to come forward with their further and better particulars for some months. If they present them to us, we shall certainly consider them on their merits.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I have a linked referendum question. In the Home Secretary's examination of part VII on referendums, has he considered two issues that do not appear in the Bill? The first is that referendums could be triggered by people other than the Government and the second is that the formulation of a referendum question should be arbitrated by someone other than the Government and the Government majority in Parliament. For example, the question could be arbitrated by the Electoral Commission.

The Government are committed to two referendums—one on the European currency and another on the electoral system—and the way to ensure that debate on each does not get clouded by the debate on how to take the decision would be to have a process that would decide the referendum question independently of Government and of Ministers of the day.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman puts two points to me. The first is whether we have considered the circumstances in which a referendum might be introduced by people other than the Government. The Bill deals with referendums that are determined by Parliament. It is possible to conceive of circumstances in which an Opposition Back-Bench Member introduces a private Member's Bill that will secure a referendum. In such a case, and notwithstanding the fact that the Bill had been introduced by an Opposition Member, Parliament would have decided on a referendum and the rules in the Bill would come into play. In practice, all previous referendums have been held on the basis of Government Bills. However, it is not Government but Parliament that decides to have a referendum. That is an important and profound distinction.

The hon. Gentleman's second point is the important one of whether there should be invigilation of the question set in a referendum. I am open to argument on that point, but my judgment is that, in the end, the question must be a matter for Parliament. The question should be clear when Parliament is coming to a decision on whether to approve a Bill proposing a referendum. However, there are good grounds for considering whether the Electoral Commission could have a role in advising Parliament and the Government on the wording of the question. It is plainly in nobody's interest to have a question that is either so confusing to the electorate or so patently biased as to lead to a decision by the electorate that remains open to question. However, it is a matter of record that the questions asked in referendums in the past have, on the whole, been fair. If a referendum is to have legitimacy, it is crucial that fairness is apparent in the question.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon) *rose—*

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I shall give way to the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) and then to my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Wigley: As the Home Secretary is coming to the conclusion of his remarks, may I ask him about his comment that the Government have an open mind about the figures and that they are prepared to discuss them in our later consideration of the Bill? Does that statement relate to the provision in clause 122, which sets a limit for by-election expenditure of £100,000 for each candidate? That is a massive figure and could lead to money influencing votes. The clause is against most of the Bill's other provisions, which we support, and that figure should be moved downwards.

Mr. Straw: The question is open to argument. Although I cannot speak for Plaid Cymru, I can speak for the three main parties in England, and it has been suggested that the total spent by each party in some parliamentary by-elections looks as though it may have exceeded the amounts submitted by candidates' agents.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Surely not.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman obviously has information to which I am not privy about the Liberal Democrats' practices. I have merely communicated a suspicion to the House. However, if it is true, it is important that expenditure limits are realistic and reflect a reality that is common to all parties.

We are open to argument, but to set a limit of £7,000 or £8,000 for a parliamentary by-election is unrealistic. It would take no account of the fact that by-elections these days are very different from those of even 40 years ago. They are not only local events in a constituency, but events of considerable national significance.

Mr. Field: I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way. May I say how much everyone—not just in the House, but in the country—will welcome his remarks about opening consultation on the question to be put in a referendum? It is crucial for the legitimacy of the process for people to feel that the question has been set as fairly as possible.

Will my right hon. Friend clarify to the House the provisions in the Bill for expenditure limits on outside campaigning organisations? Do I understand correctly that two rules are proposed in the Bill? There is a rule on the limit of expenditure by outside pressure groups for the period after the Government introduce the Bill for the referendum. That is a set amount, specified in the Bill. The second expenditure limit is in the year before a general election. That is 5 per cent. of what parties can spend in an election campaign.

My problem in understanding that is that, unless Parliament runs to the very end of its life, no one can know when the year preceding a general election begins. What advice would my right hon. Friend give to outside organisations on that point?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful—*[Interruption.]* No, I have loads of advice, and I ask the House to hold its breath while I offer it. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his remarks in respect of the referendum question, and for his representations to me about that matter.

My right hon. Friend asked a question that I have often been asked, and that has also been posed to the Neill committee. We have a maximum limit on the life of a Parliament but no minimum limit and, as we know from our recent history, elections over the past 30 years have taken place at various stages in a Government's term of office, ranging from three and a half years in the case of the Heath Government in the early 1970s, to five years—right against the buffer—on two successive occasions, in 1992 and 1997. Given those facts, the question is how political parties can judge the date from which to run the clock.

The answer is that, for accounting purposes, the clock will run retrospectively from the date of the general election. That will not be onerous on the political parties, because, in practice, expenditure by parties is largely end-loaded. However, it will provide a check on parties against anticipating an election and spending huge sums in advance of the election.

Given our constitutional arrangements and the fact that we do not have fixed elections, I accept that there is no perfect way of achieving the regulation that we all seek. I believe that our proposals are the best way of achieving that end, and will not cause the problems that are sometimes anticipated, but we are open to argument if we have missed something.

Mr. Field: Again, I am grateful to the Home Secretary for giving way. I applied my comments also to outside pressure groups. How can they judge when the clock has started, if the clock starts only when the Government call a general election? Is that not like saying that we encourage marriage, but we intend to introduce a Bill providing that, if people have not called a divorce within a certain period of time, they will be in serious trouble?

Mr. Straw: I shall not follow my right hon. Friend down the winding path of his metaphor, if that is all right. This is a debate about political parties, not family policy.

I do not accept my right hon. Friend's contention. In terms of the day-to-day non-campaigning part of their activity, third parties will not be caught by the provision but, if they seek to influence an election, which is the expenditure in question, our proposed arrangements are reasonable.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I must make progress. The leader of Plaid Cymru, the right hon. Member for Caernarfon, was rather optimistic when he suggested that I was about to come to the end of my remarks. I should like to take the House quickly through the main parts of the Bill—after all, that is the purpose of the Minister's speech on Second Reading.

Part I, which establishes the Electoral Commission, is the foundation for all that follows. To undertake its key role at the heart of our electoral arrangements, the commission must be as independent of the Government of the day as our constitutional arrangements allow, and it must be answerable directly to Parliament and not to Ministers. Much of the framework that we have put in place for the appointment of electoral commissioners and the funding of the Electoral Commission has been borrowed from the arrangements that apply, and have worked successfully, in the case of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office.

Part I confers a number of general functions on the commission. It will be responsible for keeping under review the law and conduct of elections and referendums. The Representation of the People Bill, which is before the House, makes a number of overdue reforms in the way in which we administer our elections. All too often in the past, our electoral law and practice have failed to keep up to date with changes in our political system, with changing life styles and with new technology. We need a better process for securing those changes, and the commission will provide that.

Clause 11 gives the commission an important education function. In that, we go beyond what Neill recommended, but I hope that the measure has the approval of the whole House. There is no easy answer to the problem of low turnout at elections. We cannot therefore expect miracles from the Electoral Commission. We have, however, been slow in this country to recognise the importance of preparing people to participate in civic life. There is considerably more to that than simply explaining the mechanics of voting.

People will turn out to vote only if they see the value of voting. That comes from an understanding of our institutions of government and from a realisation that politics and politicians make a difference to our daily lives. The new citizenship curriculum being introduced into schools in September is one important step. How we act and behave as politicians is another, and the civic education programmes of the Electoral Commission will be a third.

Part II, for the most part, simply re-enacts with modifications the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998 except in one important respect.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I want to ask my right hon. Friend a question before he leaves the subject of the Electoral Commission, which is in some ways the most fundamental part of the Bill. Before every election, there is a charade about whether there will be a debate between the party leaders. Will the Bill regulate election broadcasting, as it will regulate the rest of political broadcasting, so that we can stop all those silly games? We would then know exactly what we would get, we could organise matters in a grown-up way and the commission would have the same authority over such broadcasting as it will have over the setting of referendum questions.

Mr. Straw: The Bill does not regulate party election broadcasts, and it is appropriate that the commission should not. Traditionally, that has been sorted out by discussion between the political parties and the broadcasting authorities. For all the defects concerning

[Mr. Straw]

debates between party leaders, the arrangements work well, and the position in this country is certainly better than that in many countries where political parties have to purchase air time, with all the distortion that that produces. I doubt whether a commission that wants to be independent will want to take on such a task.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The Home Secretary has just paid an implicit tribute to those in all political parties who become involved in political life. Most of those people are, of course, unpaid. How does he reconcile what he has just said with the Government's attitude to political honours; for example, for those involved in local government?

Mr. Straw: I am certainly fully aware that people from all parties who give distinguished public service, often based on their political position, are honoured by the Government. The hon. Gentleman will know that it is a matter of order in the House that we do not question the award of honours, save on a substantive motion, so, if he will excuse me, I will not pursue that matter.

As I said, part II re-enacts, with modifications, the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998, except in one important respect. The registration scheme set out in the 1998 Act was essentially a voluntary one. In contrast, part II brings any organisation that supports candidates at an election within the ambit of the controls on donations and campaign expenditure.

Part III deals with accounting requirements. Over time, the commission can be expected to establish common accounting requirements, so that the accounts of all parties follow best practice and can fairly be compared, one with another.

Part IV delivers our manifesto commitments. Parties will be required to report on a quarterly basis all donations of £5,000 or more accepted by the central organisation, and £1,000 or more accepted by a constituency association or other sub-division of the party structure. In the immediate run-up to a general election, reports will have to be submitted weekly.

The prohibition on foreign funding and anonymous donations is achieved through the concept of a "permissible donor", which is to be found in clause 48. The categories include an individual registered to vote and a registered company or unincorporated association that conducts business in the United Kingdom. Trust funds, including blind trusts, are specifically excluded from the definition of a permissible donor.

Before leaving part IV, I draw the House's attention to clause 64 and schedule 6. The provisions place holders of elective office, including Members of Parliament, under a statutory duty to report donations of £1,000 or more to the Electoral Commission. Those arrangements will augment, not replace, the existing registers of interest maintained by the House and other elected bodies.

Parts V and VI control election expenditure by political parties and by third parties respectively. The limits on campaign expenditure by parties follow the recommendations of the Neill committee. In parliamentary general elections, a party will have an "allowance" of £30,000 for each constituency that it contests. The familiar limits for expenditure at local level will continue to apply.

The expenditure limits for third parties are equivalent to 5 per cent. of the maximum amount that could be spent by a political party at a relevant national election. Those controls will cover national spending by trade unions, companies and others that is intended by those organisations to influence the outcome of an election.

Part VIII builds on the Representation of the People Bill by further changing the Representation of the People Act 1983 with a view to hauling its provisions at least into the 20th century, if not quite into the 21st century. I particularly draw your attention to clause 125, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is designed to introduce into the 1983 Act the measure of clarity that Madam Speaker found that it lacked, following the successful appeal by my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Mrs. Jones) against her conviction for a corrupt practice.

The House will be aware that, in the 1997–98 Session, the Select Committee on Home Affairs unanimously concluded that the existing 20-year qualifying period for registration as an overseas voter was excessive. The Government concur with that view. However, it is arguable that the Committee's recommendation that the qualifying period be reduced to five years goes too far in the other direction. Therefore, clause 130 provides for a reduction to 10 years, and that is a balanced and equitable response to the Committee's recommendation.

I should add that I do not propose to commence that provision until after the next general election, and then only when the new system of rolling registration is in place. That will ensure that a British citizen returning to this country after spending a period abroad will normally be able to re-register on the domestic register within six weeks at most. It takes anything up to 15 months under the existing annual registration arrangements.

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle-under-Lyme): The clause does nothing to prevent plumping. My right hon. Friend will recall that, in a by-election in the Vale of Glamorgan, Conservatives Abroad put all its overseas voters into that constituency, thereby denying my hon. Friend the current Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) victory on that occasion. Cannot the Bill ensure that the place where people register is linked to the area in which they lived or were registered before they went abroad?

Mr. Straw: I am interested in my hon. Friend's comments, although I believe that there are already requirements relating to proof of previous residence. I shall follow up those points and write to my hon. Friend, and ensure that the matter is taken up in Committee.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mr. Straw: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman, and I should like to bring my remarks to a close.

Part IX puts into effect the Neill committee's recommendation that companies should be required to obtain the prior consent of their shareholders before making donations to parties or other political organisations. Political donations by a company are of such a unique nature that the decision should not, as it is

at present, be left to the general discretion of the directors. The requirement will ensure that donations are made only when the management of a company can clearly demonstrate to shareholders—not less than every four years, according to Neill committee recommendations—that they are in the interests of the company.

Our objective is to effect as much as possible of the Bill by the next general election, whenever that may be. To achieve that will be no small undertaking, given that the successful establishment of the Electoral Commission will underpin all that follows. There are several imponderables in the timetable, for example, the timing of Royal Assent and that of the general election, which will be on or before May 2002.

All being well, we aim to have the electoral commissioners appointed and the Electoral Commission functioning by November. As soon as possible thereafter, I want to bring part II into force so that the transitional arrangements set out in clause 30 can come into play. Existing registered parties will then have six weeks in which to notify the Electoral Commission of the name of their registered treasurer and to deposit a scheme setting out their financial structure. It is only then—February or March 2001—that the accounting requirements and the controls on donations and on campaign expenditure, which are set out in parts III to VI, can come into force. The timetable is demanding, but, having established long-overdue controls on donations and campaign expenditure and consulted extensively on them, it is incumbent on us to do all that we can to have them in place for the next election.

We want to work with all parties to prepare them for the implementation of the Bill. We will offer what guidance we can in the run-up to the establishment of the Electoral Commission. However, there is a limit to what the Home Office or the commission can do. In the end, it will be down to each party to prepare for those far-reaching changes. The preparations need to start now.

We should not underestimate the importance of the Bill. The conduct of elections will never be quite the same again. As with all changes to electoral law, we wish, as much as possible, to proceed on the basis of consensus. I have no doubt that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) will have points of detail to make, but I take comfort from the broadly supportive comments of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) during the debate on the Loyal Address. The time has come to get down to the business of restoring public confidence in our political institutions. The Bill aims to achieve that, and I commend it to the House.

5.2 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The Second Reading of this Bill marks a further step in the progress towards the statute book of the Neill committee's recommendations. Since the report was published in October 1998, we have had a full day's debate in the House on 9 November that year and the publication of the White Paper and the draft Bill, launched by the Home Secretary's statement, followed by questions and answers on 27 July last year. Just before Christmas, the Bill and the explanatory notes were published, and they are now before the House.

At each stage, the Opposition have made it clear that we accept Lord Neill's recommendations, and we will not obstruct their passage on to the statute book. I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to Lord Neill and his committee—they have managed to build consensus out of the bricks of political contention. We accept the establishment of the Electoral Commission, the accounting requirements for political parties, the principle of containing national campaign expenditure at a general election, and the reporting of major donations and the restrictions on third parties. I agree with almost everything that the Home Secretary has just said.

My party's criticism of the Bill is that it rejects the Neill committee's recommendations on two points. However, I was delighted to hear the more conciliatory passage about referendums in the Home Secretary's speech. I shall discuss that shortly. The key objective of putting the Neill recommendations on the statute book is to enhance the status, credibility and integrity of the profession of politics. For that reason alone, it is particularly important for Government to resist the temptation to tweak the Neill committee's recommendations to seek party advantage. If they gave in to that temptation, it would add to public cynicism about the political process instead of defusing it.

Paragraph 2.34 of the Neill committee's report states:

"We wish to emphasise that our recommendations have been conceived as part of an overall integrated scheme for the funding of political parties. There is a direct linkage between all recommendations, which should be viewed as a whole."

The Government should pay attention to that assertion.

I want to make one or two general points.

Mr. Peter Bradley: Further to the Neill principles, can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the Conservative party conforms both in spirit and to the letter of the recommendations of the Neill report?

Sir George Young: I have said that we accept the Neill recommendations and we will not obstruct their passage on to the statute book. Our disagreement with the Government is about where they have departed from Neill.

I want to make some general points, ask questions about the Bill and then say a word or two about those aspects where we think that the Government should follow Neill. First, this is a constitutional Bill and we believe that key sections should be taken on the Floor of the House. I note that there is no resolution to that effect at the moment. I hope that the Home Secretary will agree that discussions should take place between the usual channels because legislation on the holding of referendums, establishing an Electoral Commission, controlling political parties and restricting the franchise deals with clearly constitutional issues that are of interest to all hon. Members and would qualify to be considered in the Chamber.

Secondly, although it is common ground that politics here should be cleaned up—no party is beyond reproach—we should note that this country has been spared the scale of corruption that has plagued other democratic countries. Thanks to a vigilant press, a neutral and professional civil service, Opposition parties and Back Benchers in Parliament, the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office, it is more difficult to contaminate the decision-making process and for corruption to flourish in the United Kingdom than elsewhere. Those who have flirted with that have rightly

[Sir George Young]

paid a heavy price, and few people in this country choose politics as a means of enriching themselves. As the Neill report states:

"The pursuit of politics is an honourable profession to which many men and women devote their lives. Behind each career politician stands a regiment of dedicated voluntary party workers".

Thirdly, to pick up something that the Home Secretary said, there is nothing wrong in giving money to a political party. If we reject state funding—I believe that most hon. Members do—and agree with the Neill committee that

"political parties are essential to democracy",

giving to a political party promotes and strengthens that democracy. Indeed, Neill went on to assert:

"We have been given no evidence that leads us to doubt that nearly all"—

large givers—

"give generously either because they support the general aims of the party which they finance, or in order to minimise the risk of the opposing party attaining power."

None the less, there is a price that has been paid because people do not know who is paying how much for what and standards have been lower than they should be. The Bill can help to rebuild public confidence in the political process.

Mr. MacShane: Before the right hon. Gentleman leaves the subject of public funding for political democracy, may I ask whether he is repudiating the £3 million that the official Opposition receive and the very handsome extra salary and the free car that the Leader of the Opposition receives, all of which is paid for by taxpayers' money?

Sir George Young: If the hon. Gentleman had been in the Chamber in June last year when that matter was debated, he would have heard me speak on behalf of the Opposition about the implementation of the Short recommendations on the funding of Opposition parties. He will see on the record exactly what I said on that occasion.

I shall make another general point at this stage. It relates to what I call the school governor syndrome. Many of us have been school governors—the Home Secretary may still be one—but it has become more difficult to recruit school governors, not because people are any less interested in, or committed to, the fortunes of their school, but because the responsibilities, the bureaucracy and the time required have increased to the extent that it is a less attractive proposition for a volunteer with other commitments. The same sort of risk is involved in putting our essentially voluntary political organisations into a new regulatory framework.

Has the Home Secretary sat down with the treasurer of the Blackburn Labour party and gone through the eight pages of schedule 6, and in particular paragraph 10, which deals with the offence of failing to deliver a donation report? Has the Home Secretary discussed with him the spine-chilling schedule 19? Many local associations on all sides are working hard to balance the books, find candidates for local elections, pay the quota and pay the agent, should they have one. We need to keep an eye on the burdens that we put on voluntary organisations, not least because the problems that have arisen have been at head office rather than in the branches.

I deal now with some of the questions that have been asked. The key one, which the Home Secretary touched on towards the end of his speech, is: when will the Bill kick in? Let us assume that there will be a general election in the spring of next year and that this Bill reaches the statute book in late summer. Does the Home Secretary believe that all the Bill's provisions will be up and running in time for the next general election? The commission will need to find headquarters, recruit up to 50 people, set up the procedures for registration, give guidance on accounts and enable third parties to register.

In November 1998, the Home Secretary said:

"We want fair and effective controls in place for the next general election."—[*Official Report*, 9 November 1998; Vol. 319, c. 58.]

If there is an election in spring 2001, schedule 8 could bite and affect campaign expenditure incurred once the Bill becomes law. All parties preparing to contest that election will need to know whether they will be fighting it under the present regime or the new one. In its leader today, *The Times* suggested that there may be an election this autumn. I assume that the Bill will not be implemented by then.

The commencement date will also be of interest to those defined as third parties. Voluntary bodies with environmental interests, interests in animal welfare and in a host of other issues that come up at a general election may need to register and set up the necessary accounting arrangements if they are to play a part in the next election and stay the right side of the law. They would appreciate a little more light being shed on commencement dates.

Will the Home Secretary rule out the holding of any referendum until the Bill's provisions are up and running? If he does so, is that not an explicit admission that the Government will go into the next election with a manifesto commitment from the last that has not been honoured—namely, the commitment to hold a referendum on an alternative to first past the post?

On a related point, clause 10 deals with policy development grants, which will benefit everyone in this House apart, I am sorry to say, from the Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell). The Bill says that these grants are

"to assist the party with the development of policies for inclusion in any manifesto".

Does the Home Secretary envisage such grants being paid in time for useful work to be done by all the political parties before the next election, or is this a recommendation of Neill that will have to wait until the next Parliament to take effect?

Clause 11 deals with education about electoral and democratic systems. Will the Electoral Commission get drawn into the debate about the merits of competing electoral systems? I very much hope that it will not. If we are to have a referendum on first past the post versus alternative vote-plus, umpired by the commission which will see fair play, we cannot also have the umpire promoting the virtues of alternative vote-plus under this clause. Those powers will need careful definition.

The same clause gives the Electoral Commission a duty to promote public awareness of the institutions of the European Union. My understanding is that the institutions of the European Union already have a budget to do that, and I wonder whether there is a risk of duplication.

What would be the position if there were a referendum on PR or the euro? Could public money, as dispensed by the commission by way of grants under clause 11, be used

to fund partisan campaigning? There are no safeguards in the Bill to prevent that from happening, and we shall certainly want to consider the matter again in Committee.

Clause 22 contains a convenient subsection—subsection (8)—which grants trade unions exemption from being part of the Labour party. Twenty eight trade unions are affiliated to the Labour party, and Neill tells us that 44 per cent. of the expenditure from all political funds goes to the Labour party in affiliation fees, and much of the remainder is spent on activities or advertising likely to support the Labour party. Despite the fact that those trade unions are affiliated to the Labour party, this subsection says that they are not. Is it logical to regard those trade unions as totally separate from the Labour party when they are joined at the hip?

We shall need a better definition of a donation and of sponsorship under clause 45. Charities that take stands at party conferences are worried that they may be caught by the definition of a donation. Firms that send delegates to the party conference might find they have inadvertently sponsored the party. What about advertisements in conference publications or in dinner programmes? Are they deemed to be donations that require shareholder approval or declarations by individuals? What about sponsorship of the passes for the Labour party conference? Does such commercial advertising require shareholders' consent?

We need more of an explanation than we have so far had of why clause 130 on overseas voters is in the Bill, given that the Bill implements the Neill report and that that issue was not dealt with by Neill. The Committee considering the Representation of the People Bill will deal with the issue of overseas voters on Wednesday. July's White Paper made no reference to reducing the 20-year period that qualifies overseas voters. The Government have introduced this issue into the Bill, although it was not considered either by the Neill committee or by the working party on electoral procedures. Although the Labour party gave its support to a 20-year limit in 1989, it now plans to change that. I was, however, grateful for the Home Secretary's confirmation that no change would be made until after the next election and the introduction of the rolling register. I believe that some British citizens will have been entirely disfranchised by a piece of legislation for the first time since 1832.

The Government have rejected the Neill recommendations in relation to two issues. I think that it is on the proposals for referendums that they move furthest from the recommendations and are on the thinnest ice. In paragraph 12.21, Neill clearly makes the point that, in referendums, political parties may be pitted against one another, or most of them may find themselves on the same side, or one or more may be seriously split. The report states:

"Whatever happens in any particular case, it is clear that general rules governing the conduct of referendums cannot be based on predictions about the parties' behaviour or assumptions about their role."

It also states:

"The parties should certainly not be assumed to be central to all referendum campaigns".

The Neill committee rejected the Labour party's assertion in its evidence—quoted in paragraph 12.25—that

"the focus of any regulation should be on the political parties."

Neill concluded:

"We do not accept that the focus of any regulation should be on the political parties. To represent referendum campaigns as merely another manifestation of the usual party political battle seems to us both misconceived in principle and false to the history of referendums since 1975. We believe that arrangements should indeed be put in place that are specific to referendums but that they should not be based on the idea that parties are the main players in the process."

The Bill simply reinstates the arguments that the Labour party put to Neill and that Neill rejected. Indeed, anyone reading the White Paper quickly might be misled into believing that Labour had accepted Neill. Paragraph 8.2 of the White Paper states:

"The Committee's report contains a set of recommendations on these matters which the Government accepts."

In fact, the Government have accepted an entirely different set of recommendations.

The position adopted in the Bill is difficult to defend. In the event of a referendum on proportional representation, the Bill allows the Labour party to spend £5 million. That money might be spent by the Home Secretary in favour of first past the post, or by the Foreign Secretary in favour of AV-plus. That Labour contribution, which might come down on either side, would dwarf the £600,000 or so received by the umbrella bodies from the taxpayer. That shows the difficulty of predicating expenditure limits for referendums on issues such as PR on reference to political parties. Similarly, there is no logic in relating such limits to the share of the vote at the last election. The issue of the referendum may not have been on the radar screen at the time of the last election, or the parties may have been split.

As the Home Secretary knows, the Neill committee expressed concerns about the Government's proposals in its letter of 15 October. The letter says:

"We recognise that some of your recommendations in relation to the conduct of referendums differ from our proposals quite materially, the most significant being your decision to put a cap on referendum expenditure by political parties and other organisations . . . however, we are concerned that the detail of your proposals could give rise to some difficulties. You have proposed that, for a United Kingdom-wide referendum, there should be a limit of £5 million for each political party with two or more Members of the House of Commons, with a similar restriction on umbrella groups. If in a particular referendum most political parties were on the same side of the argument, there would be a risk that such an arrangement could work unfairly. We are also concerned that the proposed arrangement provides a disincentive to the formation of umbrella groups, and we question whether it is right that political parties, irrespective of the number of Members . . . should be subject to the same £5 million cap."

I recognise that the Government have changed the figures, but the principle enunciated by Neill—that the arrangements could work unfairly—is still valid. If there are to be limits, they should surely apply to each side of the argument rather than to individual political parties, whose members may well be on both sides of the argument. I am glad that the Home Secretary is prepared to look at the matter again.

Mr. Brazier: I thank my right hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene on his customarily thoughtful speech. I refer to a comment that he made earlier. Regardless of whether the Home Secretary has consulted Blackburn's Labour party treasurer, is there not something faintly ridiculous in the idea that Labour might impose a

[Mr. Brazier]

£5 million spending limit on the basis of one side of the argument, given that a recently leaked opinion poll revealed that three quarters of Labour activists were on the other side?

Sir George Young: There would be a lively debate in the Labour party if it decided to spend £5 million in defiance of the view of many Labour party members.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I was intrigued by the Home Secretary's comment that there would be individual spending limits on individual pressure groups. As someone who used to run advocacy pressure groups, I know that, under that regime, I would immediately split my group into two, three or four groups to get around the restriction. Does that not mean that his provisions are completely naive and meaningless?

Sir George Young: The limits apply to each individual third party, so we could have a proliferation of third parties all spending up to the desired cap but spending in total more than anyone could under an overall cap. We will no doubt want to return to that matter in Committee.

The Government have made a further change that did not appear in Neill. At paragraph 12.41, the Neill committee asserted that

"we believe that . . . neither taxpayers' money nor the permanent Government machine . . . should be used to promote the Government side of the argument."

Mr. Straw: We can discuss the matter in more detail, but what is the right hon. Gentleman saying on the issue of spending limits? He has criticised the Government, despite the fact that we have moved. Is he saying that there should be an absolute limit on spending by either side in a referendum, as in Quebec?

Sir George Young: Neill recommended no cap at all; if one were to accept Neill's recommendation, there would be no cap. If we are to have a cap, it should be done not by reference to political parties but according to the side of the debate. I note what the Secretary of State said about Quebec. It is worth looking at. It did not sound like a killer argument. I hope that he was genuine when he said that he would look at the matter again and will do so with a view to moving the cap away from political parties and to getting a balance between both sides of the argument in a referendum.

Mr. Field: Is it in the spirit of Neill to say that our aim should be to balance the budgets of either side of the argument? Neill puts great emphasis on the fact that a referendum campaign is different from a general election campaign. In a referendum campaign, it is important for a range of reasons to support one side of the argument to be put forward, not limited by a cap.

The absurdity of the current Government stance is that if Paul Sykes, who has already been mentioned, had bought the *Daily Mirror* when it was up for sale, there would have been no expenditure limits at all and every day the *Daily Mirror* could have published a particular view for or against the single currency. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), despite the photograph that has been circulated, is worried about such a campaign spending money to circulate leaflets. Is it not bizarre to say that the press should have no restrictions at all, but old-fashioned campaigning groups should?

Sir George Young: The right hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Neill argued against caps because he thought that they were ineffective. Even under the Bill, it will still be possible for the press to spend as much as they want until the campaigning period begins. The Home Secretary indicated that there is some unease about what is in the Bill and that he has an open mind on the matter.

I go back to the point that I was making. Neill asserted that

"neither taxpayers' money nor the permanent Government machine . . . should be used to promote the Government side of the argument."

On that recommendation on page 66 of the White Paper, the Government have written "Agreed", but that is not the case. Under the Bill, the Government would be able to publish material on the case for a particular result until a period of 28 days leading up to the poll. That could be influential. Those two changes run the risk of creating an uneven playing field, something that Neill was keen to avoid. We will want to return to those subjects in Committee and hope that the Government will have second thoughts.

The second area where Neill was rejected was on tax relief at the basic rate for small donations of up to £500. I notice that the Home Secretary said that he remained unpersuaded. I do not know whether that means that there is a chink of light and we may be able to persuade him. He did not seem to be so dogmatic as to reject it totally. Neill weighed up the pros and cons and came down in favour.

Other recommendations in Neill had resource implications, but the Government have taken them in their stride. They have increased the Short money; they are helping the parties with the changes necessary for registration; they are paying £2.6 million, which is the running cost of the Electoral Commission; and they are paying £2 million, which will be allocated yearly, as policy development grants. The Government are spending a comparable sum on their own special advisers. It is difficult to argue that the £4 million in that particular recommendation would break the bank, and rejecting it exposes the Government—unnecessarily, I think—to the argument about cherry-picking and seeking advantage.

In particular, it is perverse to criticise parties for over-dependence on large donors, but then to reject the very recommendation that would reduce that over-dependence.

In the committee's view, the principal advantage of such a scheme was that it would encourage a different pattern to political donations, so that parties would not rely for their funding needs on a relatively small number of donors each making large donations. The committee said:

"We have found very widespread support for the view that it is more democratic, and therefore in the public interest, that political parties should be funded by a large number of small donations rather than by a small number of large donations. A system of tax relief which increases the value to political parties of smaller donations is likely to encourage the parties to make greater efforts to obtain them."

As the Home Secretary knows, the committee wrote a letter in which it said how disappointed it was with the Government's recommendations, and invited the Government to make an estimate of the costs. The committee stated:

"we strongly urge you to reconsider our proposals on tax relief on political donations in the light of your conclusions as to the administrative cost of their implementation."

On those two issues, we hope that the Government will think again. The Bill will enact many of the recommendations of the Neill committee that the Opposition support. On referendum spending and on small donations, the Government have decided, so far, not to implement Neill.

The Opposition will not divide the House on Second Reading, but we invite the Government to think again on those key issues during proceedings in Committee.

5.27 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): The Bill is immensely important, and the House has been treated to two very serious speeches—by the Home Secretary and by the shadow Leader of the House—that bode well for the ensuing debate. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) will forgive me for saying that I take particular pleasure in the Home Secretary's growing stature: each time that he speaks in the House, he seems even more confident in mastering his brief. Although that gives particular pleasure to Labour Members, I should hope that it pleases both sides of the House.

I also hope that the spirit in which the Home Secretary commented on various key issues will be translated into the words on the record. All hon. Members will know only too well that, even with the best intentions, our comments do not always appear in the record as we should wish.

I should like merely to draw the Home Secretary's attention to two aspects of his speech. First, he drew an analogy—I used one also in my intervention—between the National Audit Office and the Electoral Commission, and such a parallel can only strengthen the United Kingdom's political process. Most members of the public may not be aware of the National Audit Office, but—thank goodness—politicians and those who practise politics know only too well what that body is about and the independence that it maintains. It bodes very well for the future that the commission is being modelled on that type of success.

The other immensely important aspect of the Home Secretary's speech was the issue of how questions are phrased not only in referendums generally, but in the referendum that most hon. Members will have in mind when debating the Bill—the one on the single currency. The Home Secretary's approach to the matter is very healthy and wholesome. No one in his right mind thinks for a moment that the Government will allow the matter to be settled by a committee. However, I welcome the Government's openness to rec[illegible] opinions and their stated wish to ensure that the question is as clear and unambiguous as possible.

We are debating changes to our electoral system at a time when politicians' stock in the country is not very high, to put it mildly. The approach of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the shadow Leader of the House can only add to the stature of politicians and political activity. That is good for everybody who is concerned with advancing and nurturing freedom.

For the proposals on the financing of third parties that want to campaign in a referendum to be workable, we shall have to lock some people up. Otherwise, the proposals will be unworkable, resulting in us looking foolish and our stock in the country falling.

To return to the point that I made during the intervention that my right hon. Friend kindly took, let me say that I understand how the rules will operate for outside campaigning bodies once a referendum Bill has been introduced to the House. We shall know that a clock starts ticking. The Bill will set a spending limit for the campaigning organisations that have registered. The worry is how those organisations, with the best will in the world, will remain within the law during the year before a general election. They will not know the date of a general election until the Government call it, but their expenditure in the 12 months before the election will be determined by the date of that election, even though they will have spent most of their 12-month budget before they know the date.

There are two choices. Either all campaigning organisations accept the formula for what they can spend in the year before the election campaign—and spend it every year from now on—or they take a risk in the hope that the courts will find in their favour when they plead that they acted in good faith and spent in the normal way, not knowing when the election would be.

Mr. MacShane: Is there not a third option—that this country joins the other mature democracies and has a fixed term for Parliament?

Mr. Field: There are all sorts of possibilities. Just as it is not sensible to expect the Government to surrender sovereignty over the final phrasing of a referendum question, no Government are likely to give up the considerable power of choosing the date of a general election. It may be desirable for an Opposition, but it is not practical politics.

I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary says when he sums up later. There is much to support in the Bill, but I do not believe that the Government have got the formula right here. It is not workable—or could be made workable only by sending people to prison because they have unknowingly broken the law. In this country, the Government usually lose such cases. As with the poll tax, when the Government start sending people to prison, the rest of the country does not like it. Retrospective legislation will certainly not be popular.

I have one further question that my hon. Friend might be kind enough to answer later, about the funding of political parties in Northern Ireland. The Bill accepts the fiction that, while the Republic of Ireland is a separate country, we regard it differently in respect of overseas donations. Sinn Fein is a party that is spread throughout the Republic of Ireland as well as Northern Ireland, and it will be able to receive contributions from its organisation south of the border. The organisation north of the border will not have to publish details of where those funds have come from, other than the fact that the money has been given to Sinn Fein.

[Mr. Field]

Will we require Sinn Fein in the Republic of Ireland to publish details of where its donations come from if it transfers money to its operation in Northern Ireland? We all know that considerable numbers of Irish-Americans have a particularly twisted view of this country, and enjoy raising large sums of money to be spent in a way that causes the British Government trouble. We are attempting, quite rightly, to clean up the acts of political parties in this country, but it is wrong to allow funding from overseas donations to come to Sinn Fein in the Republic of Ireland and then be transferred to and spent in Northern Ireland—which is, after all, still part of this country.

I welcome so many of the Bill's proposals, and the spirit in which the Home Secretary introduced the Bill today. However, I make a plea to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench. I do not believe that they are proposing workable measures in the Bill to control the expenditure of those outside pressure groups which will necessarily wish to influence the result of a referendum. In this instance, the Neill committee's reasoning holds, and I hope that, before we progress much further, the Government will concede that point.

5.37 pm

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): I agree with the underlying purposes of the Bill, and I accept what the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) said about its importance and seriousness. I do not doubt that we shall wish to return to some of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raised about the conduct of referendums and ensuring fairness.

I want to express my appreciation to the Neill committee, and to the Government for proposing the Bill. Most of the measures contained within it have my support. My only concern is that the Bill does not go far enough to deal with what people on both sides of the House recognise as the serious public perception that our system of financing political parties is wide open to abuse, has been abused and has discredited the Westminster system, almost to the point at which there has been a switch-off and a withdrawal of public support. It is difficult to link that with the decline in voting on which we have remarked in earlier debates, but there is considerable concern.

The concern was fostered by episodes such as the Polly Peck affair, and the situation was not helped by Mr. Bernie Ecclestone. Allegations have been made from both sides of the House that the honours system has been abused for funding purposes. I doubt whether the Bill by itself can remove all of those concerns but, even if a Bill cannot wipe out all the problems, that is not to say that, in itself, it is not of some value. In so far as the Bill is fostering openness about giving, it must enjoy the support of the House. We shall certainly support it tonight.

Some of the measures are of particular value. I have long advocated, and am delighted about, the establishment of a powerful independent Electoral Commission, which will have a role in respect of referendums and of broadcasting. I dissent somewhat from the Home Secretary's view that everything in broadcasting is perfectly satisfactory. He gave the impression that the usual channels arrangements had worked admirably, but that is not my colleagues' view. I am glad that the commission is to be allowed at least to make recommendations to the broadcasters and to engage in dialogue with them. We welcome that important safeguard, which seems not to have flowed from Neill but to be a modification by the Government, for which we are grateful.

The Bill provides that shareholders will have some say before their money is allocated to political causes. That is not merely equitable and in line with the rights of trade union members: it is long overdue. I am happy that the provision now appears to enjoy cross-party support.

Another important issue, which I believe stems from Neill, is that, flowing from the definition of a permissible source, it appears that younger citizens who are not on an electoral register may be debarred from giving money to a political party and perhaps even, per consequence, from joining one. That would not, I think, be the Government's wish, and it is certainly not ours. I hope that the point can be cleared up.

Mr. Straw: People under 18 will be eligible to make donations of up to £200. I do not think that there are all that many under-18s who would want to give more than that. The Bill also contains arrangements to cover multiple donations, of up to £5,000.

Mr. Maclennan: My concerns are partially assuaged by that. We can consider the point in Committee.

In our desire to ensure that money does not come from foreign companies, we have had to recognise the special position of companies operating under European law and carrying on business here. As I understand it, those companies may be permitted to donate. There is an area of uncertainty in my mind about the position of European party organisations campaigning in European elections. Increasingly, as the European Parliament becomes more authoritative and more democratic, it is to be anticipated that parties will be linked. Foreign parties should not be debarred from assisting British parties, and vice versa—although that is obviously not covered by the Bill. I hope that the provisions on foreign funding sources will not unintentionally preclude such assistance.

The Bill appears to depart surprisingly from the Neill recommendations in respect of the sanctions to be applied in the event that a party dishonestly accepts a non-permissible donation. Neill proposed that the treasurer or individual responsible for monitoring such matters might be liable to criminal prosecution and that the party might forfeit a sum of up to 10 times the offending donation.

The Bill retains the risk of criminal prosecution, but it would subject the party only to the risk of forfeiting the original sum. That does not appear to be a particular disincentive to accepting money from unsuitable sources. We can return to the issue, but why did not the Government follow Neill's recommendation on that point?

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) mentioned another departure from Neill in respect of the taxation of donations of £500 or less to political parties. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman, because our politics would be healthier if more people were involved in the funding of political parties. If it were more widely recognised that making political donations

was a virtuous participation in democracy and the public were given every possible encouragement to do so, parties would not be driven to seek the massive funding from rich individuals that has characterised the funding of the two major political parties in the past. That valuable proposal has been dropped without adequate explanation of the Government's thinking.

There are wider considerations concerning the encouraging of private spending initiatives. I was interested to read in *The Times* this morning of the Chancellor's interest in encouraging charitable spending. He even trailed some expectation that the Budget might offer some inducement to such expenditure by individuals to foster the civic society. If we are to foster the civic society by offering charitable relief, we have now a golden opportunity to restate the case for the involvement of citizens directly in their democracy through participation in the electoral process by donation. I hope that the Government will reconsider the issue.

I am not sure of the answer to my final point of detail. The issue was raised by the Government and has been the subject of some dialogue across the Floor in this debate. I do not argue with the one-year limit on election expenditure, to be computed retrospectively, but the problem is partly a result of the nonsense that allows the Prime Minister, who is a competitor in the race, to fire the starting gun. That is a constitutional anomaly that is rare in other countries. It should be eliminated by providing a terminal date for Parliament so that no party is disadvantaged. It is much clearer to the Government when the clock will start ticking on expenditure than it can be to even the most shrewd and experienced observers of the political scene.

My main concern is another phenomenon that has been developing. Elections in this country are increasingly fought and won in as few as 100 constituencies. Having a cut-off point for expenditure will not deal with that problem. Those constituencies that will determine the next election are identifiable today. The Home Secretary said that expenditure was end-loaded—or some such expression—but, in those constituencies, it could be front-loaded as a means of avoiding the consequences of this provision.

Dr. Julian Lewis: In support of what the right hon. Gentleman has just said, let me say that political parties may, as the Home Secretary said, tend to concentrate most of their expenditure nearer the election or referendum than at an earlier stage. However, pressure groups will tend to take a much longer view; they will want to spend their available money much more evenly throughout the whole period, but will not know when they are allowed to start doing so.

Mr. Maclennan: That is a fair point. It reinforces my view about the desirability of ending the uncertainty about the date of elections, so that calculations on funding and other matters can be made freely and openly. In prefacing my remarks on this point, I said that I was not sure what the answer was within the ambit of the Bill. My fear is that the limit provided will not be effective—perhaps it cannot be. Perhaps we should introduce a set and predictable date for elections.

I believe that the Bill, although well intentioned and quite useful, so far as it goes, will not significantly alter the public perception about the possibility of buying political support. Transparency is important and desirable—however, we have for many years seen transparency at work in other countries. In the United States, people openly give money to candidates for election to the Presidency. Millions of dollars are spent openly, yet the cynicism of the public in that country must not be under-estimated, despite the existence of complete transparency and the fact that it is possible to chart the favours bought and given for that money. An article in *The Guardian* pointed that out as recently as last Friday.

I fear that, in putting all the emphasis on transparency, the Government have missed a real opportunity to do something that would really change the public perception. I regret, in particular, that they have not limited donations by individuals. This could be seen as a self-serving view from a Liberal Democrat who is incapable of summoning the kind of assistance that Mr. Bernie Ecclestone gave the Labour party. I do not for a moment deny our inability to summon to our war chest the sums of money that can be commanded by those who are either in Government or can present themselves as tolerably likely to be in Government. That is the reality—it is why that kind of money is given, and will continue to be given unless the practice is stopped.

The Neill committee considered the issue. It pointed out that, in the 1997 election, the Labour party received 21 donations of more than £50,000, and that, in 1996–97, the Conservative party received 119 such donations. It is simply not tenable to argue that people who donate large sums of money are not courted by senior members of those political parties. So long as that happens, and large sums of money are donated by powerful, industrial figures, the public will be suspicious about what the donors are getting in return. It is hard to deny the probability of a major quid pro quo; people do not give such sums out of the goodness of their heart, or because of their peculiar commitment to supporting democracy instead of buying a painting by El Greco.

The only way to eradicate such suspicions is to limit donations. We proposed to the Neill committee that the limit should be £50,000, but appear to have been unable to obtain consensus in respect of that or any other figure. But the principle still needs arguing.

If there is disappointment that the Bill does not deliver the public confidence the Government claim that they seek to secure, I hope that they will return to the issue with an open mind. Incidentally, they will probably find it more difficult to obtain such large sums of money, although perhaps not for a few years—however, that is not the point. The point is that the commitment to democracy should be spread across many more people, and donations should be capped at a much lower level. However, that would have a significant consequence for the funding of the two old political parties, as they used to be called. When elections are in the offing, the Labour and Conservative parties spend as if there were no tomorrow. Indeed, representatives gave evidence to the Neill committee of how it works from their point of view, and how they had to raise funds of more than £10 million to meet the challenges of elections.

I think that we are spending too much on elections. We have not yet gone as far as the United States, but the need to raise such sums of money goes far beyond what is required to ensure that the issues about which the electors are being asked to decide are properly understood.

[Mr. Maclennan]

Not only is more being spent on each general election, but there is, concurrently, a requirement—which I welcome—to spend more on other elections. I refer to elections for the mayoralty in London, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the European Parliament. Demand for money with which political parties can fight those elections is growing exponentially. If we do not cap donations at a lower level than that proposed by the Government, political parties will be forced to go cap in hand to rich donors and entertain them at the Dome, and the favours that the donors ask for will be more difficult to withhold.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I apologise for not having heard the opening speeches. Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that he wants to change the whole electoral system in favour of proportional representation and various other major changes, while not allowing anyone to pay for it? Is he assuming that the state will pay for it all?

Mr. Maclennan: No, I am making no such assumptions. I have not mentioned the mode of election—nor, the hon. Lady may be surprised to discover, has it even been on my mind. I am, in this part of my speech, concerned much less with the effect of the Bill on Liberal Democrat fortunes than with the business of Government. The Labour party's dependence on substantial amounts of money donated by a handful of very rich people who can then call the tune is undesirable. The hon. Lady's party argued eloquently for state funding when in opposition. The Home Secretary appeared, uncharacteristically, to have forgotten, in his reply to my earlier intervention, that, as recently as 1994, in its evidence to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, the Labour party argued that the public were prepared, and would be more prepared, for an element of state funding. I am arguing only for a cap on expenditure that is substantially below what the Bill proposes, for a cap on individual giving of around £50,000, and for a modicum of state funding for elections.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Is my right hon. Friend aware that, just before Christmas, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions announced that the cap on spending for this year's London mayoral elections should be set at £990,000 per candidate? There was widespread opposition to that announcement, as it seemed to make it even more clear that yet another potentially worthwhile electoral process could be bought by the few, rather than owned by the many.

Mr. Maclennan: I am grateful to my hon. Friend but I do not want to labour the point that I have made.

I do not suggest that the problem of the pressure on political parties in a modern democracy that arises from the need for funding will be solved entirely by state funding. It is simply a principle that we can espouse without changing very much the direction of our thinking about our democracy. Most aspects of elections are funded by the taxpayer, and the partial state funding of political parties does not seem to me to be a very big step beyond what has long been accepted as inevitable.

The dangers of not tackling the problem are rendered eminently clear by what is going on in Germany at the moment. But for the grace of God, the fate of ex-Chancellor Kohl and his colleagues could be shared by a number of senior figures in this country and in the United States. We should not be as complacent as I think we are at risk of being about our own system for funding politics and political parties.

My party and I welcome the Bill, but I hope that it will not be thought that it represents the end of the discussion. The Bill should not draw down the shutters on further steps to reinforce the process of paying for our democracy in a way that allows people to be confident that the system cannot be bought by people outside the political process, as has sometimes happened.

6.3 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): The right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) can be satisfied that the Bill will not by any means be the end of the debate.

Speaking for the official Opposition, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) said that our record in connection with funding for political parties is better than that of other countries, and I would not disagree. However, the right hon. Gentleman would agree with me, I am sure, that we should not be complacent: enough has happened in the past few years to cause a good deal of disquiet among people who would not normally be worried about party financing.

Over the years, I and other colleagues have pressed for reform of the rules governing party funding and general election expenditure. On 12 February 1997, just before the general election, I introduced the most recent of my ten-minute Bills on the subject. I am glad to say that a good deal of what was advocated in that and in other colleagues' proposals has been incorporated in the Bill. We are making progress.

The then Conservative Government and Labour Opposition were very critical of each other's money raising methods, and I pointed out at the time that it was difficult to understand why the matter had not been referred to the Committee on Standards in Public Life. In the circumstances, that seemed the appropriate course of action, but the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)—to whom I sent a note to the effect that I would mention him in passing in this debate—refused to do so. When the committee was set up under Lord Nolan, Labour Members pressed again and again for it to consider party funding, but the right hon. Gentleman told the House:

"I do not believe that that is the right way to proceed."—[*Official Report*, 21 May 1996; Vol. 278, c. 95.]

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire did not really explain why the question of funding was not considered when his party held office, but I am genuinely pleased that he has accepted much of what is in the Bill, and that he has said that the Conservative party will not vote against it tonight.

I am pleased at that, not because there is any danger that the Government might lose in a Division, but because we are slowly approaching unanimity on the question of party expenditure and funding generally. That is useful, and will do much for British public life.

The Bill provides that donations above £5,000 will have to be declared. I see that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is about to leave the Chamber. Before he

does so, I want to tell him that I should like the sum to be £2,000. That proposal may or may not be accepted in Committee, but there is a case to be made for it.

Mr. MacShane: The experience in America is that the sum can be set at any level, because it is always divvied up. For example, if the limit is £5,000, and a person wants to donate £50,000, he can find nine others to give £5,000 each. Ways can always be found to get around any limit that is set.

Mr. Winnick: That is an argument against any restriction being established, but I am not persuaded.

I am also in favour, despite what my hon. Friend has just said, of restricting the amount that any individual, or members of his or her immediate family, can donate. It is unfortunate that one person can donate a very substantial amount of money, even when it is done for the best of reasons. Any such donation to the Labour party would of course be for the best of reasons, but even so I consider it undesirable that the amount is not restricted. Again, that may be a matter for consideration in Committee.

Mr. Peter Bradley: Normally, I follow the arguments of my hon. Friend very closely, but does he not agree, on reflection, that his proposal that donations to political parties ought to be restricted to one or two members of a family is profoundly undemocratic? It is almost like saying that only one or two family members can have the vote.

Mr. Winnick: That is my hon. Friend's view. However, it is obvious that any restriction on how much an individual can donate can be got around very easily, as a person can get his or her spouse or adult children to contribute. The real argument is whether a person should be prevented from giving more than a certain sum. My hon. Friend obviously disagrees—one of the rare instances of disagreement between us. My views are along the lines that I have advocated.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Would the hon. Gentleman include in his proposed restrictions the possibility that family members might make donations to different parties? Not all family members vote the same way, after all. Would the hon. Gentleman ensure that there would be an upper limit on the amount that a husband could give to one party, and on what his wife could give to another? How would he make that work?

Mr. Winnick: That is an interesting point, which could be considered in Committee.

Blind trusts have been the subject of a good deal of criticism. It is right that they should now be outlawed, and I welcome that. I basically believe—this has long been my view as well as that of the Labour party—that all political funding should be known, declared and above board. The proposed Electoral Commission will have a job on its hands and I can well imagine the complaints that will be made to it by the Government, the Opposition and the Liberal Democrats. Like the Committee on Standards in Public Life, it can expect such complaints and there is nothing wrong with that. However, it must have—my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary persuaded me that it will have—the powers to police fully party income and expenditure. It will no doubt issue annual reports and I trust that the people appointed to it—I hope that they will not be the subject of any controversy—will stand no nonsense and will not be browbeaten by the Government, the Opposition or anyone else. I want to see an end to the curse of secrecy in party funding. I hope that the Bill will go a long way towards ensuring that.

I may run the risk of being accused of making a party political point even though I said that, in so far as I could, I would try to avoid party controversy. I have already said that I welcome the fact that the Opposition will not vote against the Bill's Second Reading and that we are achieving a degree of unanimity. The Leader of the Opposition has said that Conservatives believe that foreign donations should be outlawed, so it is strange and disturbing that the Conservative party can continue to be bankrolled by a person who may be on the electoral register here but who clearly lives in another country and, moreover, is that country's representative at the United Nations. If that is not sinister, it is undesirable and disturbing, and I can well understand those Conservatives outside the House who have expressed their concerns. They are doing the Conservative party a lot of good by saying that such a state of affairs should not continue.

In a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) that has been publicised, Lord Neill said that he considered that the manner in which the Conservative party received money through a Belize-based trust was undesirable. He said that it should not receive money from such a source. I hope that the Conservative party will consider the position. From the point of view of Labour Members, there is much to be said for such funding to continue. It provides us with ammunition and, no doubt, the Conservatives would use such ammunition if we were funded in the same way. One cannot take politics out of politics. However, given what I said about funding being above board, it would be in the interests of the public good if the Conservative party discontinued the practice of receiving money from, and being bankrolled by, someone who not only lives abroad, but takes an active role in another country's affairs. We shall see what happens in the months leading up to the next election.

I have long argued that it is right for limits to be placed on individual candidates' expenditure and I notice what will be done about by-election expenditure. However, it makes no sense to place such a limit on the expenditure of individual candidates while allowing parties nationally to spend as much as they like. Common sense demands that things should change.

I understand that it is more than 100 years since a limit was placed on how much could be spent on behalf of candidates. I hope that, when the provision that clearly places a limit on political parties' spending in general elections comes into force, it will be fully honoured. I have no doubt, however, that there will be complaints to the Electoral Commission, but I cannot imagine—I may be wrong, but I hope that I am not—that any future Government will change this aspect of the Bill.

I come to company donations. It should be remembered that Labour Members made the point at the time that no trade union could ever donate money for political purposes unless it had held a ballot. Such donations would be illegal; and that law dates back to before the first world war. When the Conservative party decided that trade unions should hold a series of ballots every 10 years, Labour Members argued that that provision should also

[Mr. Winnick]

apply to companies. Our arguments were fair and so successful that one or two trade unions that did not have a political fund decided to create one. We made the fair point that the same rules should apply to trade unions and companies alike. The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire did not challenge that aspect of the Bill, and I am pleased about that.

I am not altogether persuaded, however, that company and trade unions ballots will take place on an equal footing. As I understand it, company ballots will take place through a resolution at the annual meeting of a company and that there will not be a ballot of individual shareholders, as happens in trade unions. Such balloting may be impractical for companies—I do not know—but the manner in which trade unions and companies are allowed in law to make donations should be on an equal footing. That would end a good deal of controversy.

The Bill is a landmark in the reform of political expenditure and party funding. It is a worthy measure and, even though one or two aspects of it cannot be put into practice until the following election, I am pleased that it will be on the statute book before the next election. I am pleased to support the Government who have introduced the Bill. I hope that much of the sleaze and secrecy of past years will end for good. Although I did not want to mention it, some parties were so determined to hide the way in which they raised money that they used river companies, and so on. I want to strike a non-party note as far as is possible, so I express my welcome for the Bill.

6.17 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I was a member of the committee that drew up the Neill report, and I am grateful to the Home Secretary for his kind remarks about the contributions of the members of that committee. I shall not be partisan, except to point out to the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) that the Neill committee has had to make recommendations about the practices that other political parties, including the one in government, have adopted in the past year or so and, indeed, before the previous general election.

It was a fascinating experience to be a member, as it was the first time that I had served on such a committee. Because of the thorough way in which we dealt with the issues and considered others, such as the referendum issue, that we realised were becoming important, it was fascinating to see how, over a period, members from different backgrounds came together to reach their conclusions. In that respect, I pay particular tribute to Lord Neill, whose chairmanship was admirable. The committee considered the issues thoroughly and the hearings that we undertook throughout the country and abroad—especially in Canada and the United States—were valuable.

I warmly welcome the Government's substantial acceptance of the committee's report, which I hope will stand the test of time for many years to come. I am aware that the Electoral Commission rightly has the remit to review developments as time goes on and especially after elections, but I hope that the broad framework of the Neill report will stand the test of time. The fact that the Government and all the political parties accept that broad framework means that that is likely to happen.

I do not want to waste the House's time by simply pointing out where the Government and the Bill agree with our report and nor do I want to go through the rationale for all our recommendations. However, I wish to discuss several issues and the first is the Electoral Commission. That is one of the most important recommendations in the report, and the Government have added to the funding responsibilities of the Electoral Commission new responsibilities such as taking on those of the boundary commissions, review of electoral law and guidance on party political broadcasts. That is absolutely right. It was not within the remit of the Neill committee to make such recommendations, because they are outside the issue of funding, but it makes sense to draw all those aspects of elections into the Electoral Commission's responsibilities.

Part VI refers to the rules relating to third parties in national election campaigns and in referendums. The importance of the recommendations on third parties should be underlined. Our experience in the United States brought that home to all members of the committee. As the House knows, the one recommendation in the committee's report with which I disagreed related to the limit on the expenditure of political parties in election campaigns, but there is obviously a broad consensus that we should go down that route.

What is happening in the United States and, I venture to predict, will become clear in the next presidential election, is that, with the limits on spending in presidential election campaigns, there has been a rip-roaring take-off in the amount of expenditure undertaken by third party campaigners. Many of those are campaigning on specific issues, but some get very close to campaigning for a particular presidential candidate. It is easy to see how that would happen, if there were no restrictions on third parties.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) referred to some of the difficulties in relation to a referendum campaign. He is right. Inevitably, when a limit is imposed on the expenditure of a political party, those who want to support that party, perhaps only on particular issues, will find ways of putting their funding into the third party campaign, rather than into the political party. There must therefore be an element of control on third parties, similar to that on political parties.

The leader of Plaid Cymru, the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), raised the matter of by-elections. The Government are right to impose a limit of £100,000 on by-elections. We all know that, in one way or another, the limits have been transgressed in most by-election campaigns, for an obvious reason. It is unrealistic to expect a by-election campaign to be conducted within the same limits as those that apply to an individual constituency during a general election.

The Home Secretary was right to identify the crucial point that by-election campaigns during a Parliament, particularly from mid-term onwards, are effectively mini general election campaigns. All of us who have been involved in by-election campaigns know that the media spend an enormous amount of resources in such campaigns, which are effectively national political campaigns. It is therefore essential for the political parties to respond by sending their Cabinet or shadow Cabinet Ministers to take part in the by-election campaign. In that

context, the present limits are unrealistic. We have all turned a blind eye to what is going on, and it is right for the Bill to take a realistic approach.

The Government have taken a different view from the Neill committee in relation to clause 46, which sets the de minimis threshold in relation to some donations that will be outside the controls in the Bill. We recommended a de minimis limit, and I was particularly keen on that, but we proposed a figure of £50. The Government took that figure up in the White Paper and invited responses. They have now proposed a limit of £200. As a practising politician—rightly, there were only a few of them on the Neill committee—I strongly support that change, for three reasons.

The first is a rather small reason, but it was mentioned earlier by the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan). Writing to the Home Secretary in his response to the White Paper, following discussion with the committee, Lord Neill drew attention to the position of young people under the age of 18. With the definition of permissible donor being restricted to those on the electoral register, young people under 18 seemed to be precluded from making contributions to political parties.

The Home Secretary stated in his response that raising the figure to £200 would cover the point. He stressed that again this afternoon, when he responded to the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. He is right to say that most young people under 18 would not want to contribute more than £200 in any one year to a political party.

As we all know, there are endless small ways in which party activists contribute to political parties. Many fund-raising events are held in the constituency. Donations of £10, £20 or £30 are made to a supper, a large proportion of which, after the cost of the food is covered, goes to party funds. Further donations are made through raffles and so on. It would be intolerable for a local organisation to have to track all such donations. That would bring the entire system into disrepute.

The de minimis provision is right, and £200 is a more realistic figure. Having spent not far off £50 on various activities in the constituency in the first seven days of the new year, I recognise that the £50 limit was too low.

There is a wider point, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) referred in his opening remarks. We must be careful that the system is not so restrictive that it makes people frightened to take on the job of treasurer in the local party association. That was much in my mind when I argued for a de minimis provision.

That is a practical matter, and an important one. It is not easy to attract people to take on the role of constituency party treasurer. If they thought that they would be responsible for tracking all those small donations, most people would be put off. I warmly support the provision in the Bill. Even in relation to the responsibilities of the national party treasurer, we must be careful not to impose possible criminal liabilities for which the treasurer cannot be fully responsible.

Although I warmly support the move to £200, I believe that two points require further consideration. In raising them, I am not suggesting any change to the £200 limit. First, there could be a loophole in relation to foreign donors. The problem is to track back foreign contributions. If a £200 contribution is made on a number of occasions, how can that be checked? It is worth exploring the issue in Committee, but that is not a reason for changing the figure.

Secondly, with regard to UK donors, the individual donor will be responsible for informing the party when his overall donations exceed £200. Many innocent contributors may transgress the limit through ignorance of the fact that they must track their donations themselves. It is important that the donor's responsibility should be publicised.

The point about young persons was one of the issues raised by Lord Neill in his letter to the Home Secretary, following the White Paper. The Home Secretary responded positively, as he did on two other issues. In clause 64 and schedule 6, it is made clear that, where donations of more than £1,000 are made to individuals, whether they are candidates for Parliament or for mayor, it will be the responsibility of that individual to disclose the donation, not the responsibility of the national treasurer.

That is right, and not just for the reason that I do not want impossible burdens to be imposed on the national treasurer. There will be situations in which there will be donations to individuals that the national party may not be able, or may not wish, to track. The election of the mayor of London will provide a classic example of that. The candidate who may go forward for the Labour party will not necessarily be a candidate for whose campaign the party feels complete responsibility for tracking all donations. In other words, there is not necessarily an alignment between who stands for mayor and whether he or she wholly supports party policy. It is therefore right to include that clause in the Bill.

I turn now to fairness in referendums. The key issue here was equal public funding for both umbrella organisations. In our last debate on this matter, I referred to the fact that all members of the committee were absolutely astonished by the unfairness with which the referendum for the Welsh Assembly was carried out. When we took evidence in Cardiff, it was clear that, were it not for the courage of one woman, a Labour party supporter, who took out a large overdraft at her bank, there would not have been a campaign against the Welsh Assembly. That would have meant that, although substantial funds from Government expenditure were available for the yes campaign, there would have been nothing at all for the no campaign.

The element of fairness is best provided, above all, by having an equal public contribution for the umbrella organisation on each side. Achieving fairness by imposing a total cap on expenditure for both sides is extraordinarily difficult, which is why it is so important to keep stressing the element of having an equal public contribution to each side.

As we have already seen from this debate, a number of difficulties will arise with expenditure caps during referendum campaigns. My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East referred to the difficulty that I described a moment ago, and he is right to say that there will be all sorts of ways legitimately to get round those caps. It will be impossible to impose equal expenditure caps on each side.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) made a good point when he referred to the possibility of funding through a national newspaper. There is no

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doubt that, when there is an expenditure cap, the role of the media becomes much more important, and they can create a major imbalance if they take differing editorial attitudes to the two sides in a referendum. That is why the Neill committee found that it would be difficult to have a fair, workable system of capping in referendums. I still hold to that view, which is why I took my original view on capping as a whole.

No doubt that matter will have to be discussed further because it is clear that there is unhappiness about it, but we must recognise that we will never have a perfect system of capping that will achieve fairness. Hence the importance of fairness in public contributions.

In debates in the House and exchanges in the Neill committee, we took a different view from that of the Home Secretary about the moratorium on the Government's role during the run-up to a referendum campaign. I am glad that the Bill includes the 28-day moratorium, which meets our point, about which the Home Secretary was initially a little dubious.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman would not wish to give the House the wrong impression about the fairness of the referendum campaign in Wales. Is he aware that one of the key supporters of the no campaign was one of the richest men in Wales, Sir Julian Hodge, who now lives in an offshore tax haven? He is a multi-millionaire, and we know that he provided funds and resources for that campaign.

Mr. MacGregor: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that we went into detail on that matter in Cardiff, and it was not Sir Julian Hodge but his son who provided funds. We took evidence from him at some length, and his contribution was a good deal less than the amount that the yes campaign had. More importantly, he said that it was only when he saw press publicity about the courage of the Labour supporter who intended to fund the no campaign through an overdraft that he realised that he ought to make a contribution, so I point out that, if the Labour supporter had not taken that action, there would have been no contribution from Sir Julian Hodge's son either.

Having said how grateful I am that the Government have responded to so many of the Neill committee's points, I shall turn to the one outstanding difference that the committee and I still have with the Government. Before I do so, I want to make detailed points to which the Minister could respond when he replies to the debate.

The first point is one that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead made in an intervention and in his speech, and relates to the Government's decision that the campaign period for a national election should relate to the 365 days up to the election. I recognise that there is no perfect system for deciding the campaign period, and we wrestled with the matter at length, but I have considerable worries about that recommendation, for all the reasons given by the right hon. Gentleman. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire also referred to that issue.

The provision is retrospective, and it is not fair to put people who may incur substantial liabilities in the position of not knowing when they embark on a particular course of action whether it will be within the framework of the law. Political parties and, as my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East pointed out, third party campaigners cannot tell when the election will be.

That is not a fair basis on which to set up a system because, as we all know, the last two years of a Parliament can often be regarded as an election period. At such times, one is always aware that there might be an election. Even in this Parliament, people are talking about there being an election within the next year. It is difficult for an organisation to plan its expenditure when it is so uncertain about what the 365-day rule refers to.

Another problem is that the rule gives the party in power an advantage because it does at least have an idea of when the election campaign will start. I am therefore unhappy about the proposal. The Neill committee made a recommendation and, on page 125 of its report, in paragraph 10.48, it said:

"We conclude . . . the precedent established by the 1983 Act"—

which relates to constituency expenditure—

"should be followed and that the national spending limits, like those relating to individual candidates, should apply 'before, during or after the election' and to any expenditure 'on account of or in respect of the conduct or management of the election'. We are aware that, over the years, the courts have had to construe these words in a variety of instances. We suggest that the opportunity be taken to reconsider the formulation of the definition of 'election expenses', in the light of those cases, so as to ensure that it is drafted in a way that makes clear the intention that the concept is not to be interpreted restrictively."

I know that there are difficulties concerning that recommendation, but there are also difficulties with the proposal in the Bill.

The one point that the Government have rejected is tax relief for small donations. My right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire read out the passage of the Neill report in which we emphasised that we thought that this should be an integrated package. That is the single main element of the Neill recommendations that has been dropped. It is important that the House should understand our case.

I recognise that the Government will respond that the matter is, in any case, an issue for a Finance Bill. That may well be so but, as the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross pointed out, *The Times* this morning said that the forthcoming Finance Bill will contain a proposal that is not a million miles away from what I am talking about. I hope that the result of this debate will be that the Home Secretary will be prepared to lobby the Chancellor about the Finance Bill.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge that, if clause 128 can write into the Companies Act 1985 provisions relating to companies and how their donations are decided, there is no logical reason why provisions in this Bill should not be written into a Finance Bill?

Mr. MacGregor: That is a fair point, and I certainly hope that, as a result of the contributions to the debate, the Government will pursue the matter in that way.

I feel very strongly about the issue, which is an important part of the package. To make my case, I shall quote two passages from our report, one of which my

right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire has already quoted. The first passage, from the beginning of our report, sets the scene by stating:

"The pursuit of politics is an honourable profession to which many men and women devote their lives. Behind each career politician stands a regiment of dedicated voluntary party workers."

I shall shortly set out the relevance of that to the Home Secretary's opening speech today. The second passage is from paragraph 2.23, which says:

"The argument here is that strong, healthy political parties are essential to the functioning of a strong, healthy democracy. In particular, strong and healthy parties are necessary as a means of recruiting ordinary citizens into decision-making positions at all levels of government, local as well as national, and also as a means of engaging very large numbers of people . . . in the whole democratic process. Our view is that parties are indeed essential in this way, and our recommendations"—

especially those relating to public funding of political parties and tax relief—

"are intended to foster vigorous party activity, especially at local level, but in ways that are consistent with the principle of openness and help to preserve both the independence and the accountability of the political parties."

Mr. MacShane: I have listened to the right hon. Gentleman's argument about tax relief, but the fact is that my constituency contains some of the poorest people in Europe—people who are on benefits or extremely low salaries—so there is no money available for political donations, even with tax relief. I expect that Westminster, Chelsea or South Norfolk contain far more people who would be able to make such contributions, if they were enticed to do so by a tax relief. The right hon. Gentleman is merely proposing another means by which to encourage money to flow to local Conservative associations, at the expense of Labour constituency parties in much poorer parts of the country.

Mr. MacGregor: That is the biggest load of nonsense I have heard for a long time. It certainly is not what new Labour is all about. Labour probably attracts more large donations than the Conservatives, so it cannot plead poverty. In addition, thanks to 18 years of successful Conservative Government, many Labour party supporters have incomes that are well above the basic rate of tax.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire said, in response to the White Paper's rejection of the concept of tax relief, Lord Neill stated:

"we strongly urge you to reconsider our proposals on tax relief on political donations in the light of your conclusions as to the administrative cost of their implementation."

The reason is that one of the main points made in response to our recommendation was that administrative cost would be high. I challenge that claim. We framed the recommendation so that the process would not be like tracking all donations and tax reliefs relating to this country's many charities. Instead, responsibility for assessing the number of donations and the total costs and appealing to the Electoral Commission for the relief would rest on national treasurers, with the result that such requests would flow through only three or four avenues. I do not believe that the administrative issues facing the Government or the Electoral Commission would be anything other than extremely small.

As the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, Lord Bassam of Brighton, admitted in a written answer in the other place on 13 October last year, the administrative costs of a tax relief scheme have not been estimated. The members of the committee asked the Government to make such an estimate, but we have not yet received an answer. I hope that the Minister who winds up the debate is prepared to reveal the Government's estimate to the House tonight.

I have noticed that, more recently, the Home Secretary has retreated from the argument based on administrative cost, presumably because it was not much of an argument in the first place. His argument now rests on two points: first, that such relief would amount to a form of general state aid by another route; and, secondly, the need to balance the loss of revenue against other spending priorities. Our argument is that encouraging many more smaller donors to the political parties is healthy for the political process itself and helps parties to reduce their dependence on large donors, which is also healthy. Therefore, the arguments in favour of a tax relief are civic, whereas those against it relate to cost.

The cost would be limited, because it would be related to basic tax relief on donations of up to £500. I note that the Government have estimated that the total benefit to political parties would be about £4 million to £5 million. That is a minuscule sum compared with the £750 million spent on the dome, or the £500 million that the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and *The Times* tell us that the Chancellor is considering making available to charities through tax relief measures in his next Budget.

In respect of his new proposals on tax relief on charitable donations, the Chancellor argues that it is a way of encouraging "a new civic patriotism". I believe that there is no better way of demonstrating such civic patriotism than playing a full and healthy part in our democracy through our political parties. The Home Secretary echoed that thought several times during his speech today, referring to the importance of political donations as a crucial link between the Government and local communities, and to those who recognise their civic responsibilities and duties and who play a part in political parties. He laid great emphasis on the contribution of political parties to civil life.

It would add little to the £500 million for charities to allow tax relief on modest political donations. I plead with the Government to reconsider their attitude. The Neill committee regarded its recommendations as an integrated package, and saw a tax relief scheme as a means of compensating political parties for the undoubted results of the Bill's being passed, in that it will be less easy to raise money from sources that have until now been major contributors. If we are to have a healthy political scene, it will be essential to encourage more small donations.

My one regret is that the Government have not taken up the recommendation on tax relief, but I generally welcome the way in which they have responded to the Neill report. Subject to one or two minor reservations and the larger one relating to tax relief, I am delighted with the Bill.

6.47 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): The Bill is important because it recognises three long-standing constitutional fictions, places them under the spotlight, defines them and takes action on them. I welcome the all-party support that has been displayed during

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

the debate, but have to point out that, in the past, the Conservative party has prospered from the maintenance of those fictions, despite widespread evidence of public disquiet about less-than-straightforward party funding arrangements.

The first of those constitutional fictions is that elections are contested by the individuals listed on the ballot paper who, under relatively recent legislation, may—if they want to—provide a party label to guide voters. In reality, elections are, to an overwhelming extent, conducted by parties. We Members of Parliament might choose to believe that our fabulous personalities and stirring deeds are the factors that sway voters. There is no doubt that, to a certain extent, each election hinges on the merits or otherwise of the candidates, but not to the extent that is sometimes pretended. In truth, most people vote primarily for a party and for the candidate on the ballot paper who has secured the support of that party.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Does not the logic of the hon. Gentleman's argument suggest that the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) should now submit himself to a by-election, given that it was the Conservative party, not him personally, for which his constituents voted at the last general election?

Dr. Whitehead: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I was referring to the position in general elections. Unfortunately, it is not custom and practice in the House for everyone who crosses the Floor to submit to a by-election. Some hon. Members who are present in the debate were previously members of other parties.

In general elections, the national campaign plays a substantial role in voters' behaviour at the ballot box. It is a constitutional fiction that local party members have nothing to do with the public's view of the national party's campaign. It is right to take steps to regulate parties' conduct in elections. The public have a right to know that their representative is who he or she claims to be, and that the party supports its local representative's campaign ethically and openly. Who funds the party and the means by which it is funded is therefore important. The limit on national spending restores reality to a constitutional fiction.

Those who have stood for election, especially in the sort of marginal seats that the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) described as the key battlegrounds of modern elections, will recognise the sense of wonder and puzzlement that candidates experience as they struggle to ensure that they remain within the local spending limits, only to find that a national party has moved in and bought all the poster sites. That happened to me, and, regrettably, the party was not mine. When that happens, the local campaign appears ludicrous to many members of the public. Strict limits are demanded locally, while a parallel campaign takes place in those key battlegrounds, funded from who knows where. Candidates can also find that a supposed non-party organisation—a third party—which is well funded from opaque outside sources is campaigning hard against them. That biases election expenditure against the logical intention of the local expenditure limit.

That leads to a second constitutional fiction. It makes no sense to keep to local expenditure limits while arguing for a free-for-all national limit, especially as that results in the outcomes that I have described. American research shows that money thrown at a campaign seems to make a difference. In United States proposition and referendum campaigns, money seems to talk.

In a seminal book on the subject, Thomas Cronin analysed a series of American referendums and propositions and the difference in expenditure between two sides, which varied between three to one and 200 to one. He also analysed specific referendum and proposition campaigns as they progressed. He considered public opinion that favoured an initiative when it was first presented, examined the funding for the campaigns and looked at the result. Two examples, plucked at random, are instructive.

In Montana, the proposition was:

"Shall a mandatory 5 cent deposit be placed on beer and soda cans and bottles if, by 1983, 85 per cent. of such containers are not being voluntarily recycled?"

The proponents spent $12,000 and the opponents spent $500,000. Initially, 70 per cent. agreed with the proposition; only 29 per cent. voted for it.

In California, the proposition was:

"Shall a 10 per cent. surtax be placed on oil company profits from California sales proceeds from which tax to be used for improved public transportation?"

The proponents spent $400,000, while the opponents—the oil companies—spent $5,770,000. Three months before the vote, 66 per cent. of the population agreed with the proposition, but the eventual vote in favour was 44 per cent. On an American analysis, throwing money at a referendum campaign can change the outcome. The public are properly concerned about that.

The third constitutional fiction is that the United Kingdom eschews referendums. To bend the famous saying, the British constitution does not take account of referendums except when it does. That has led to ad hoc arrangements for the referendums that have taken place. It is high time that a comprehensive system of regulation for referendums was established, especially as they are set to become a far more regular feature of the United Kingdom political scene in future.

I strongly support giving the Bill a Second Reading tonight. However, in the spirit of the dialogue that is taking place in the Chamber, I hope that several points will be examined closely in Committee. First, I hope that third-party election campaigning will be considered. The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) mentioned that earlier. He said that he was head of a political action organisation and that he would have split his organisation into four. I devised names for the four sections: Friends of the Bomb, Amis de la Bombe, Cold War Warriors and Catch a Spy Inc. All those organisations could contribute to a campaign. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that that had happened in the United States and that fractured campaigning money gets around regulations on third-party funding. I do not have any immediate suggestions on how to deal with that, but I hope that the Committee will examine the matter in some detail.

The second point is about referendums. The Bill is sensible: the Electoral Commission will designate relevant campaigning organisations when there are two possible answers and set boundaries on campaign funding during referendums. However, the Bill does not provide for responsibility for regulating referendums that do not cover at least the area of a regional development agency.

That excludes many referendums on the organisation and structure of local government, some of which will cover an area as large as a county or a city of 1 million or more people. They may attract considerable funding. Unlike referendums that are within the scope of the Electoral Commission, they may be triggered by what is effectively a proposition campaign—a campaign to gather sufficient signatures to trigger the referendum. Therefore, they have an entirely different dimension.

Mr. MacShane: I have listened to my hon. Friend's argument with great interest. Is he not saying that the Bill is unlikely to be the last word? We are opening a Pandora's box. As democracy, devolution and other democratic consultations take off under new Labour's programme, the House and society will have to return to the issues that the Bill covers.

Dr. Whitehead: My hon. Friend is right. It may be a good idea at this stage to ascertain whether account can be taken in Committee of the fact that referendums in Britain are here to stay at different levels of government. They need proper regulation to secure public confidence in their outcomes.

I mentioned setting up referendums that are triggered locally. We have made the assumption that national referendums are generally triggered by Government and agreed by Parliament. It is interesting that the Local Government Bill, which is currently before another place, provides that a referendum can be triggered locally by a write-in vote of 5 per cent. of the population requiring a local authority to set up a referendum on whether they should have an elected mayor. Under those circumstances, the campaign to trigger the referendum has life, funding and other attendant attributes. In the United States, signature harvesting for propositions, especially when they are backed by commercial interests, has a substantial financial life of its own. It may be undertaken by companies that specialise in gathering signatures. They may be paid per every 1,000 signatures and make a substantial sum of money. We may ask ourselves whether we would like that practice in the United Kingdom.

I note that the Local Government Bill, which was published before Christmas and is currently proceeding in the other place, provides only in clause 30 for the Secretary of State to

"make provision as to the conduct of referendums."

The categories listed in clause 36, however, which may be the subject of the Secretary of State's regulation, significantly do not include the regulation of either the finance of a referendum or the process of gathering signatures to trigger one.

Clause 118 prohibits the publishing of promotional material on referendums by local authorities. That provision may be regarded as applicable only to regional or national referendums. I hope that that is the case; otherwise we shall be left in the difficult position where anybody but a local authority can publicise a local or sub-regional referendum. We have no clarification of the extent to which a local authority can or cannot pursue a position that it has reached in the light of a referendum triggered in its area. We are told that all that will be the subject of separate regulation, but it might be prudent to add to the remit of the Electoral Commission by extending its overall responsibilities on the fair conduct of referendums to provide some overall input to the conduct of sub-regional and local referendums in order that the regulations arising from the Local Government Bill are not seen to be at odds with those arising from this Bill.

There is a further possible anomaly that I hope might be looked at in Committee. Clause 95 specifies that the Bill will apply

"to any referendum held throughout . . . the United Kingdom . . . Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland . . . or any region in England specified in Schedule 1 to the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998."

That schedule defines the areas that are, broadly speaking, coterminous with the pre-existing boundaries of the Government offices for the regions, which make up the regional development agency areas. That has been the basis on which RDAs have been set up, but the Government have committed themselves, in the fullness of time, to the development of elected regional assemblies, which I applaud, provided that they represent the will of the people in the region. That reflects the comment of my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane). The Green Paper on RDAs envisaged that some form of legitimisation by referendum or similar means would be required to achieve that so a further category of referendum could arise, which is, one assumes, the reason for the provision that a referendum in a region shall be covered by the provisions of the Bill.

It is by no means certain, however, that a referendum to establish a regional assembly would be conducted in an area coterminous with the present RDA boundaries. Indeed, it has been suggested that the decision to go for a referendum might be within the competence of the regional chambers established to run alongside RDAs. As regional boundaries are presently a given and arise from Government offices for the regions' boundaries, does it follow that every region would want a referendum to take place within the boundary that it was given when it was set up? Is it likely that exactly the current boundaries in the south-east or the south-west, for example, would form the basis for a successful referendum on a regional assembly? As matters stand, and from my reading of the Bill, it appears that that is the case. If not, a resulting referendum would not be regulated by anybody.

Those are elements of the Bill which I believe that it is important to get right, but overall they are small matters in relation to the change that will be achieved by the passage of the Bill itself, which will strike a great blow for public confidence in the integrity of the electoral system that they rely on for the validation of public decisions. The electors will know that the political parties that represent them and seek their votes are properly constituted and transparently funded and that the conduct of elections and referendums by those parties is fair and unswayed by people throwing money at them, either directly or indirectly. That change is incalculably important to the maintenance of the integrity of the political process of the United Kingdom and the probity and even-handedness of its electoral procedures.

7.4 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): One of the pleasures of debates of this particular sort, in which there is broad agreement about what is being debated, is that, when one side is being rude

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

about the other, it does so in a civilised manner. I thank the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead), who made some allusions to my party in the early stages of his speech, for having maintained that very civilised tradition.

On 9 November 1998, when we debated the Neill committee proposals for the first time, the Home Secretary, for reasons I can only guess at, suggested that political excess was uniquely a feature of the previous 19 years. I animadverted on that later in the debate—there was an element of rewriting history in those remarks—but I am delighted that his speech today went back to the 1880s, although he regarded the events of 1880 as especially excessive, even after a series of anti-corruption measures had been passed. As I remarked in columns 96 and 97 of *Hansard*, the excesses of the 1880 election—16 separate petitions were argued, eight Members lost their seats and seven towns were disfranchised—gave rise to the 1883 anti-corruption legislation, which transformed the political landscape. The highly beneficial effect of that legislation, which I quoted that evening, was the academic verdict of the principal authority on those matters, which was that

"the cut in permitted spending led directly to the growth of political participation."

Political corruption, I fear, does not go back only to the 1880s; it goes back to the 1780s as well. I was once the Paymaster General. The apogee of corruption in the Paymaster General's office—in the 18th century it was a profitable office to hold—came in 1781 when Lord North, fresh from losing the American colonies, instituted an investigation of that office for embezzlement: six Paymasters General were pursued beyond the grave and Lord North himself was found to owe a bob or two. Since nothing changes in our history, the great Edmund Burke was appointed Paymaster General in the capacity of Mr. Clean and took through the House in 1782 a Bill that said that the penalty for forging the Paymaster General's signature shall be death without benefit of clergy. That was amended 25 years later by the House, which is more lenient than the Executive, and the penalty was translated to 14 years in Australia. I am bound to say that I thought 14 years in Australia a heavy price to pay for forging my signature.

Mr. MacShane: Does the right hon. Gentleman remember that the former right hon. Member for Thanet, South, Mr. Jonathan Aitken, was once Paymaster General in his Government? Things never change in the House, do they?

Mr. Brooke: The hon. Gentleman runs the risk of being too clever. My former right hon. Friend, who represented Thanet, South, was never Paymaster General. If I may say so, it is a mistake for people in glass houses to throw stones.

The Bill, which I welcome, comes in a long tradition of such clean-up legislation, but I share the view of my right hon. Friends the Members for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) that, if we are to secure again the academic verdict that I quoted a moment ago, the tax encouragement of small donations is desirable. The argument of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), which he deployed on my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk, could be equally applied to tax encouragement for charities, but I do not imagine that he will be doing that when the Chancellor of the Exchequer introduces such proposals in the Budget.

Like the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk, I noticed the irony of the Chancellor taking his second bite of this particular charitable cherry in the context of taxation this very day, having taken his first bite in the pre-Budget statement late last year. I particularly noticed, too, his emphasis on civic virtues. The previous Government, in 1986 and thereafter, made changes to taxation in relation to charitable giving. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk was a Treasury Minister at the time, as I was, and we had some responsibility for that.

It is significant that one of the central features of the announcements that the Chancellor made today was the proposal to sweep away the limits on gift aid and to make gift aid possible at any level of gift. That is an irony. The Government are saying that it is too complicated and would be administratively impossible to introduce the tax encouragement of small donations for political parties at the very moment when they are earning the plaudits of the charitable lobby by changing the regulations on gift aid—or at least we assume that they will do so.

On corporate donations, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk and the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross will recall the Committee stage of the 1978 Companies Bill. My right hon. Friend was the Opposition Whip, and the right hon. Gentleman was one of the Ministers steering the Bill through the House. The late Ian Mikardo introduced amendments to that Bill that would have achieved the objectives of clause 128 of the Bill that we are considering tonight. I recall that either the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross or his colleague, the present Minister for the Environment, entertained Opposition Members by the skill with which they deflected Mr. Mikardo's amendments and argued that they should not be part of the Bill.

If we are to have clause 128, there is the hazard of a read-across to the issue that my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire raised about determining referendum expenditure via political parties, because that carries the potential for an internal vote within political parties to decide on which side that party's expenditure is to be expended in the referendum or in what proportions. Such a split in funding is commonplace in north America. When I lived there, great corporations quite cheerfully gave equal sums to both sides of the argument. It was up to them to decide in what way that served their shareholders' interests, but it was a feasible proposition.

Subsequent to my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) concentrated on the timing of expenditure. The Government's present proposals at best resemble the useless advice to a man with cramp that he should have taken salt three days before, and at worst recall that bizarre episode in the 1920s when summertime was introduced. In the other place, an hereditary peer,

whose descendant has perhaps survived the Government's axe in the past couple of months, argued that the wife of an hereditary peer, hitherto childless, could give birth to twins on either side of the midnight hour at which summertime either came in or went out, which would have affected the primogeniture. With that degree of relativity on the timing of expenditure, the Government's present proposals run the risk of taking them into the theatre of the absurd.

Mr. Maclennan: Before the right hon. Gentleman leaves that interesting, historical account, it might be of interest to place on record the fact, which I freely admit, that the line that I took in debates on the 1978 Companies Bill on the late Mr. Mikardo's amendment was forced on me by the late Mr. John Smith, who was not satisfied that the unions would accept a straight no, which I would have preferred because it would have made my life a lot easier and enabled me to bring the matter to a conclusion quickly.

Mr. Brooke: It is a feature of these debates that, when we make these occasional forays down incidental byways, we pick up all sorts of interesting information from other travellers along the same road.

I want to refer to four final minutiae. First, I notice in clause 2(2)(b) that the Prime Minister's consistent practice of moving key Executive jobs from this House into the other place, where Ministers are not able to be cross-examined by elected Members of this House, may soon claim the scalp of the Home Secretary. It is conceivable that, under this legislation, the Home Secretary could find himself serving in the House of Lords.

Secondly, in 1989 I was involved in negotiating the first reforms on expenditure for by-elections and the trend towards realism. I wholly support the Government's proposals, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk. I support the Home Secretary's assertion that it was all different 40 years ago with the observation that, in the 1945–50 Parliament, the then Opposition did not win a single by-election yet they reduced the Government's majority from 150 to six at the general election in 1950. That is an index of how different by-elections were in those days.

Thirdly, although I was responsible for negotiating the 20-year rule with Lord Hattersley, and Walworth road, I agree—in this respect I am echoing an earlier exchange involving the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody)—that, although it has been introduced in the Bill rather less than gloriously, the 10-year rule will make it much easier to verify the residential credentials of someone who has been abroad for some time.

Finally, I do not apologise to the hon. Member for Rotherham, because he has been playing an active part in the debate, and one of the consequences of that is that he may get caught in the crossfire. When he said of a particular European issue in the domain of the Bill that he hoped that the Government and the Neill committee would attend to it, I hope that it was a slip of the tongue and that what he meant was that the Neill committee and the Government would attend to it, for it is much better that these matters are dealt with by the Neill committee first.

7.17 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). The Bill is far more complicated than it seems at first sight, as this issue has begun to unravel as a great public problem. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster referred to the corruptions of the 1780s and the 1880s. Those of us who enjoy our Trollope will know that buying seats and being dismissed from a seat were key issues in all his great novels.

In his reply to my intervention, the right hon. Gentleman talked of people living in glass houses. I patted my wallet trying to think of what he might mean. His former right hon. Friend, to whom I referred, Mr. Jonathan Aitken, was once Chief Secretary, which is a superior, modern form of Paymaster General. I do not want to be partisan, but the plain fact is that the creation of the Neill committee and this extremely complicated Bill stem from the financing of the Conservative party as revealed in the past decade, although I could include the whole of the last century. We have not mentioned the occult financing from Greek shipping millionaires and Hong Kong millionaires. We know about Neil Hamilton and Mohamed Al Fayed. I regret the fact that Mr. Michael Ashcroft has capitulated to *The Times* and has not had his day in court. I expect that the trial would have led to the same humiliation that has been visited on the former hon. Member for Tatton.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Gentleman's comments have been typical. Why does he not also mention Mr. Bernie Ecclestone and that well-known gentleman, Robert Maxwell, who was a donator to the Labour party? The Labour party might give back some of the money to the Maxwell pensioners.

Mr. MacShane: As is well known, the Labour party returned Mr. Ecclestone's cheque. The huge difference is that, the more isolationist the Conservative party has become in recent years, the more it depends on foreign funding and offshore money of one sort or another. That is the political reality, and it has led to this extremely complex Bill, about which I have some questions to put to my hon. Friend the Minister. It is a long Bill: it has 175 pages. Moreover, schedule 19 specifies no fewer than 106 offences for which members of the public involved in politics might be fined or put in prison. I think that the office of party treasurer, nationally, regionally or in constituencies, will become extremely sensitive.

I want to focus on just three elements of what is a long and complex Bill. I strongly believe that this is not the last word. I think we all salute the work of the Neill committee, although I disagree with its recommendations on tax relief for political donations. Let me repeat what I have already said. In my constituency, wages are low, and many people are on benefits because of the wicked policies implemented by the Conservative party over the past 20 years. In South Yorkshire the chances of raising money for either party are slim, but I think that a tax-relief incentive would benefit, mainly and unfairly, the Conservative party, and I consider that, rather than administrative complexities, to be a good and principled reason for rejecting it.

I fear that we shall have to search for Solomons to sit on the Electoral Commission. Party politics is a passionate business, involving not just sums of money in connection

[Mr. MacShane]

with the conduct of elections, but for the winners of an election the control of some 40 per cent. of the total wealth of any modern nation. That is why the question of party political funding has been so sensitive in all the advanced democracies. It has done huge damage to politicians in all parties. One example is Chancellor Kohl. I broadly support increased public funds for democracy. In Germany, there is almost limitless cash for party political operations—for political parties and their foundations—yet Chancellor Kohl faces criminal charges because he took secret funds from different donors, and spent them without any public accountability. I therefore welcome the acceptance of the principle of transparency, which I think is reflected throughout the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Minister may not reply to this point tonight, but I hope that he will consider the issue of overseas voters. I feel uneasy about the decision to reduce the franchise for the first time in decades, if not hundreds of years. I was going to say that I felt uneasy about voting in favour of that, but it appears that there is to be no division. A huge number of British citizens live overseas, and feel passionately that they are British. They feel that they have a strong connection with this country, and that the defining moment of citizenship is the moment when they can cast their vote.

The House of Commons Library has done some research for me. According to the latest estimates, which date back to 1993, there are 8.6 million British nationals living overseas, 650,000 of whom are in Europe. In 1997, 214,000 United Kingdom service personnel were posted overseas, and 840,000 United Kingdom state pensions are paid to pensioners living in countries throughout the world.

It used to be said that there should be no taxation without representation. I am not sure whether we should now say that there should be no receipt of welfare benefits without representation. Many British men and women go abroad to work for international organisations. They may be employed by a British company, and have been posted overseas, or perhaps to work for a non-governmental organisation. Such people may marry and live overseas for 10 or 15 years. The House should think carefully before telling them suddenly that their key, core citizenship right of voting is to be taken away.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Has my hon. Friend observed that, regrettably, the Bill has not been used to remedy the wrong whereby people living in Gibraltar, who are European Union citizens, must still suffer the democratic deficit—both in relation to the EU itself, although the European Court of Justice has found in their favour, and in another regard? Ultimately, their Government are here, and this is their Parliament. If we go to war, the people of Gibraltar cannot say, "If you don't mind, we will sit this one out."; they are committed. Yet, unlike comparable territories connected with the Netherlands, France, Spain and the United States, they have no representation.

It is shameful that we should call ourselves a democracy while people peppered around the globe have no vote and no representation in this place. I am sorry that the Government did not use this opportunity to recognise the existence of a wrong and remedy it, and I hope that they will think again soon.

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend has made some fascinating points. I am pleased that I have the confidence of constituents, and hope to retain it in order to continue to be the hon. Member for Rotherham. However, there may be those who would like to be hon. Members for Gibraltar, the British Virgin Islands, St. Helena, Belize or other leftovers from the British empire. My hon. Friend was right to draw our attention to the anomalies involved, although I am not sure whether the Bill will resolve them.

The question of the removal, or reduction, of the right of overseas British citizens to vote is important. Other Bills being considered extend the right of members of the Irish Republic, a sovereign foreign state, not just to vote but to participate, as candidates, in our political procedures. We have extended the right to vote in local and European elections to the many hundreds of thousands of European Union citizens who live in the United Kingdom. I agree with that entirely. In his new year address, the Prime Minister said that Britain would never succeed as a nation isolated from Europe and the rest of the world. We would send out quite the wrong message if we told our citizens who live overseas, temporarily or in the longer term, that, after 10 years, they could not vote. If something is wrong in principle, it should be stopped immediately. The 10-year cut-off makes no sense.

Later in the year, some of us will attend parties organised by the Democrats abroad to promote candidates in the US presidential election. Supporters of the Opposition may attend parties organised by the Republicans abroad. The United States, that great democracy, encourages American citizens living overseas to participate fully in the American electoral process. Each country has different rules, and I do not wish to generalise but, on the whole, the trend is in the opposite direction to that proposed in the Bill. As we begin to live in a more international community, other countries are trying to involve their citizens overseas by allowing them to vote.

I do not expect my hon. Friend the Minister to give me a direct reply tonight, but perhaps the Government will agree to consider this again in Committee. Although few of those concerned register or vote, I know that there will be immense disappointment about the removal of this connection with Britain.

In regard to the financing of referendums, the Neill committee seems to have strained at gnats, while being prepared to swallow camels. The plain fact is that the great referendum campaign in regard to whether Britain remains a full member of Europe is already under way.

Earlier, I showed the Home Secretary a rather flattering picture of me that Mr. Paul Sykes has caused to be circulated in my constituency: he has put up huge posters of a young, better-looking Denis MacShane. Friends of mine in Rotherham have telephoned me to say "Gosh! Who is paying for all this? I did not realise that the Labour party had all this money." A young chap is beaming down at the good voters of Rotherham. I do not really look like that any more, do I?

The big print simply says "Denis MacShane". The small print contains the anti-European diatribe from Mr. Sykes, who, according to the *Yorkshire Post*, has said

that he is prepared to spend £235 million on his campaign against Europe. He is not alone: the entire foreign-owned press in this country campaigns, day after day, against Europe, or specifically against the European currency. They have a right to do so, but let us have no nonsense that a public debate will start only when we come to a referendum, whenever that is after the five economic tests and so forth have been met. There are a number of anti-European bodies. One is headed by Lord David Owen and seems to have people allocated to it from *The Times*. These outfits are working assiduously and already occupy a huge amount of terrain. I am not quite sure how one can effectively counter that, but the idea that the Bill will in any way aid parties and organisations that are not anti-European is plain nonsense. I do not think that the Neill committee can deal with that matter; nor can the Bill completely.

Dr. Julian Lewis: In the interests of fairness to Lord Owen, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would, on reflection, think that he should describe Lord Owen and his campaign as very much in favour of Europe and of this country's membership of it, but against Britain joining the single European currency, a view that is shared by at least 64 per cent. of the electorate.

Mr. MacShane: One of the things that I have got used to is people saying, "We are in favour of Europe, but we do not like the social chapter. We are in favour of Europe, but we do not like the single currency. We are in favour of Europe, but we do not like common agricultural policy. We are in favour of Europe, but we do not like the European Commission. We are in favour of Europe, but we do not like Mr. Santer, Mr. Prodi, Mr. Patten or the recently ennobled Lord Brittan." As Abba Eban said in a slightly different context, that is just semantic fiction. We should bury that silly word "Euro-sceptic." Those who are anti-European should be honest, as the hon. Gentleman is, and come out and say so.

I welcome Clause 11, which deals with the funding of policy discussion. We already have a considerable amount of state funding—funding by the taxpayer. Whatever the words to disguise it, £3 million goes straight to the Opposition Front-Bench team. An enhanced salary has been created only in recent years for the Leader of the Opposition. The chauffeur-driven car that he enjoys is a perk that is worth a good deal of cash.

I have no problems with that, but I should like us to go a stage further. Whether that can be done through amendment in Committee, or is something that the Neill committee has to come back to remains to be seen, but it is necessary for political parties to have the resources to carry out effective discussion and education about a policy.

Older members of the Conservative party will remember how, after 1945, it made a comeback because it became a mass party again. It opened great centres for political education. The Conservative party adjusted to the new realities of the post-war world through extensive policy discussion and debate. Too much of our country's discussion on policy, on political ideas and on what Government policy of the day should be is in the hands of editors of newspaper opinion pages, or is based on the big speeches of party leaders. Often, those are distorted from all sides—I am not making a Labour party point—by the way that they are reported in the press. To counter this, none of the parties has adequate resources for policy education and discussion.

The Bill suggests that the Electoral Commission could in any financial year make available £2 million of so-called policy development grants to political parties. I welcome that but, if we assume that that money will be divided up just between the three main parties, each year they will get £650,000 which, if divided into 659 constituencies, is about £1,000 for each constituency. If we divide that by the average number of voters in each constituency, it comes to about 1p per voter each year for policy discussion.

I hope that that is not a reductio ad absurdum argument, but, as an American senator once said, when we add £1 million, £1 million and £1 million, we begin to have real money, but when we divide £2 million between the political parties, activists and constituencies, it does not add up to much.

If we are, as a Parliament and as political parties, to win back some control over our democracy from the men of money and the organisations of money, we will have to make education about policy part of our political party process. That will require funding. It is good that schools are starting civic education, but that will be of no use if political parties do not have the resources to carry it forward. The Electoral Commission is exactly the right body to oversee the payment of that money and to ensure that it is not given to parties to be used at the pleasure of the party leadership, but spent properly on policy discussion and debate.

I welcome the Bill. It will help to reassure the public that the massive vote that they gave the Labour party to form the Government is being used to introduce law that will not only end the scandals that have disfigured our politics and gravely damaged what was once a great political party, the Conservative party, but to usher in continuing debate about the need for the people and their elected representatives to regain some control over the political process.

I know that we are a property-owning democracy, but property, capital and money should not own democracy. The Bill is the beginning of reclaiming the right of people and their elected representatives to have some control over the policy and the political parties that govern in their name.

7.36 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I aim to give the shortest speech in the debate and, of course, the only one that comes from a non-party perspective. I do not have a party; I do not want a party. I am not showered with the largesse of Short money. I do not seek Short money. The proper posture for the Tatton Independent is one of cheerful frugality, but I was elected on an issue of trust. I care about trust, and the people of Tatton showed spectacularly that they cared about it.

This important Bill is, significantly, about trust. It is about the essence of our democracy. It is about the way in which we prevent abuses. For the first time, there are provisions to control our political parties, which up to now have been getting and spending money and wasting their powers as they wished because no legislation existed. Amazingly, until now, they have been operating

[Mr. Martin Bell]

more or less in a free-fire zone. Our electoral law is based on the electoral law of 1883, which was most recently revised in 1983. Some change is long overdue.

I have nothing against political parties. I regard them as necessary—I would not even say necessary evils. They are necessary for sound and stable government, although it is possible to have one or two Members of Parliament outside the party system, but the parties' power has increased, is increasing and should be diminished.

For that reason, I welcome the Bill. To some extent, it reins in the excesses of party spending and party funding. Essentially, the parties are raising more money than they can safely spend. That is part of the problem.

I welcome, as I know that many other Members will, the ban on foreign funding. I welcome, as I know that they will, the greater transparency on the point at which donors should be named. I do not welcome—it is the fundamental flaw of the Bill, and of the Neill report—the relatively large amount of money that the parties are allowed to spend. In the last general election, the two main parties spent more than £25 million each. At the next election, they will be able to spend nearly £20 million.

Where does the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department think that money is coming from? Is it coming from the little people? Is it coming from the rank and file? Is it coming from ordinary members, from whom it can safely be raised—from the rubber chicken dinners? There are not enough rubber chickens out there. There are not enough party regulars with the will to eat them to raise that kind of money. This is an important reservation, as it goes to the heart of some of the abuses of recent years.

If I may correct the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), it was an American congressman who said:

> "A million dollars here, a million dollars there, and very soon you're talking about real money".

Today, we are talking about real and serious money, but I do not understand how any party will be able to raise it safely to the extent allowed in the Bill.

Is it possible that new members and new contributions will be attracted to the Labour party by some of its innovations, such as the closed list system in the European elections, the extension of the property franchise in elections in the City of London—the last rotten borough in Britain—or the decision to use an electoral college to select Labour's candidate for mayor of London? It seems to me that those proposals are undemocratic, and that there is an undemocratic element at the Bill's heart: it concerns how the money will be raised.

In evidence to the Neill committee, I suggested that each party be allowed to spend an upper limit of £2 million in a general election. Andrew Rawnsley, of *The Observer*, suggested that the figure should be £5 million. Whatever the figure is, it will have to be within the reach of ordinary party members. If it is not, where will the money come from, if not from the Bernie Ecclestones and Michael Ashcrofts—be they never so blameless characters, as I do not doubt that they are—when the bills come to be paid?

When the Government adjust their policy until, quite by chance, it suits Mr. Bernie Ecclestone's business interests, and when the Conservative party argues for a life peerage for Mr. Ashcroft, people will start to ask, "What's going on?" They will get a whiff of something that they do not like. I know that the people of Tatton are very sensitive to that.

Will we go down the American route, in which a candidate might spend $16 million to buy a Senate seat, but—as happened in California—still fail? I was based in America for many years, and remember talking to Senator Lawton Childs—Democrat of Florida, and an honourable public servant—who was weighing up whether he should run for a second six-year term. He worked out that, if he did so, he would have to spend one half of his time fundraising, so he quit, because that is not what he went into politics for. I feel that, with the central defect in the Bill, we are going down that wrong road.

We do not want to go down the road of turning our party conferences into trade fairs. If I wanted to have lunch with the Home Secretary at the Labour party conference—a fairly unlikely contingency—I would be happy to pay for my lunch, and I would be happy to pay for his lunch, but I would not want to have to raise for the Labour party £10,000, £20,000, £50,000 or whatever the equivalent might be for the privilege of having lunch with him.

I can recommend a better way to go. Last July, the Tatton Independent party held its annual conference, in Knutsford, and it was much more party than conference. I paid for everyone's lunch, and the only deal that I made with them was that I was not allowed to have a standing ovation. It worked extremely well. It is a kinder, gentler politics, much cheaper and much closer to the people.

I am sometimes asked—because of the strange way in which I got into the House—whether I think that the current Parliament is under the same taint of suspicion as the previous Parliament. I used to say no. Now I say, "No—well, not in the same way." The culture of greed has gone. The cash in brown envelopes has gone. The invoices supplied for amending a Finance Bill have gone. A recent celebrated libel case definitively drew a very welcome line under that, and I should, in passing, pay tribute to Sir Gordon Downey—a very great public servant, and a servant of this House—and to his vindication. We knew all along that he would be vindicated.

Does that mean that the beast of corruption has been got rid of in our system? No, it does not—it is still out there somewhere. It lies out of range of the nets and harpoons of the parliamentary policing system, which is working quite well now, in two spheres: in the funding of political parties and the award of honours, and in the relationship between them.

We know that there is a relationship between the two because of some of the evidence given to the Neill Committee. Although that evidence is not reflected in the Bill, it was very important evidence, which came from Lord Pym, who was at that time chairman of the political honours scrutiny comm'.tee. He was asked whether there was, or should be, any connection at all between donations to a political party and the subsequent award of honours.

Lord Pym was the gatekeeper of the system, and one might have expected him to answer, "No, in no circumstances, and over my dead body." In fact, he answered that, in some circumstances, all other things being equal, he could see that a political party contribution could be a bonus rather than a minus, because the

individual was putting his money where his opinions were—hence a contribution to a political party was an achievement.

Just consider that. When has signing a cheque been an achievement? Accumulating money—depending on how it is accumulated—may be an achievement, but I do not think that signing a cheque is one. All other factors in a candidate's qualifications being equal, the chairman might as well have provided us with a rate card. How much for a peerage? How much for a knighthood, or for a humble MBE? What will £50,000 a year for five years buy? Hon. Members will appreciate where we were going with that practice, which was opening the door to the buying and selling of influence.

Now the political honours scrutiny committee has a new chairman—Lord Hurd—who, to his great credit, is applying the rules much more vigorously, and we have a much better system in place. However, there is still a grave risk, which comes from the Government's briefing paper on the Neill report, issued at the end of July. The paper quoted with approval one of the scrutiny committee's criteria: to consider

"Whether the achievements of the individual overall are meritorious to an extent that makes donation of lesser significance."

Within those words lurk hidden shades of meaning.

We shall not have a clean system and a system that entirely enjoys the public's trust until donations to our political parties are of zero significance, or even of disqualifying significance, in the award of honours.

Mr. Winnick: I am listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech with interest. I do not want to rehearse the entire argument now, but would not a restriction on the amount that an individual may give to a political party not only help in addressing the issue that he has been describing, but provide a means of restricting the sums that political parties are able to spend at general elections?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful for that intervention and agree absolutely. I recommended such a limit to the Neill committee, but it was not accepted.

We have to devise a system of politics that is more honest, cheaper, and wins the trust of the people. I am arguing not for a community of saints and angels, but for a system in which the crooks, charlatans and the sharp operators so often attracted to the honeypots of politics lose their rights of privileged access.

7.48 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), whose very presence in the House symbolises the reasons why the Bill is so necessary. He also made a very good case for why the Bill does not go as far as it might.

I welcome the Bill, and believe that, for the past 25 years, there has been a crying need for reform of party funding. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary had trouble remembering the exact date—or even the existence—of the Houghton committee report. I remind him that the committee reported in August 1976—which was very much the date on which the United Kingdom and the House took a wrong turning on the issue of party funding. We missed the great chance that we had then of reforming the party funding system, as every other European and north American country did in the 1970s or 1980s.

We missed the opportunity then mainly because the then official Opposition party—under its then new leader, now Lady Thatcher—turned its back on any reform whatsoever of the party funding system and pursued what one can only describe as a beggar-my-neighbour policy. Although the then Opposition were themselves bankrupt, they knew that the Labour party would always be worse off than they were.

The Conservative party continued that policy for the next 20 years, eventually leading to its own undoing at the 1997 general election, amid accusations—in many cases, realities—of sleaze. The Conservative party has now had a change of heart and I welcome its new approach to party funding.

Compared with some of my hon. Friends, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick), I am a relative novice to the subject, but in 1994, I produced a report for the Institute for Public Policy Research on the subject. While I was preparing the report, I visited Germany, Canada and Quebec—by chance, the same places that the Neill committee visited last year. My report had only 18 recommendations compared with the 100 made by the Neill committee, but I am glad that many of those 18 were repeated by the Neill committee and have found their way into the Bill. I am delighted that the Bill delivers some of the reforms that I argued for, including the disclosure of donations over £5,000, the ban on overseas donations, the introduction of national spending limits for elections and referendums, the requirement to hold shareholder ballots and, last but not least, the establishment of an Electoral Commission.

However, I agree with the hon. Member for Tatton that there are some points on which the Bill does not go anything like far enough. Once we get through the arithmetic, clause 72 and schedule 8 set the limit on national campaign spending at £20 million for a party that puts up candidates everywhere in the UK, or £19 million for a party that has candidates throughout Britain. That is far too high and will not achieve the primary goal of reducing the amount spent by political parties at general elections.

The Neill committee's report estimated that the main parties spend £26 million and £28 million respectively at the 1997 election. The widely drawn definition of campaign expenditure in clause 65 and schedule 7 shows that the system can never be so watertight that there is no scope for parties to pass off some election-related expenditure as administrative overheads. That was the experience in Canada, on whose system our proposals are largely based. There was endless argument between the parties and the director of elections about what counted as expenses. There are bound to be grey areas where it is impossible to decide whether something is election expenditure, such as opinion polls commissioned by parties before an election.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), who is back in his seat, referred to the difficulty of defining election expenditure and therefore opposed the idea of capping. I think that he drew the wrong conclusion. Of course it is difficult to distinguish election expenditure from other expenditure, but that does not mean that we should give up on the Bill's central ambition of capping election expenditure. If we are to have a downward step change in election spending, it would make more sense to adopt the Labour party's proposal to the Neill committee of a £15 million limit.

[Mr. Martin Linton]

Lord Sawyer, who was then the general secretary of the Labour party and gave the evidence, said of the party's £26 million spending at the 1997 election:

"To raise that kind of finance . . . we have had to seek donations up to £1 million, and we would need to continue that sort of fundraising programme in the absence of any substantial state aid."

A limit of more than £15 million is bound to result in a party's seeking large donors, beyond its members and smaller donors.

A related point is whether there should be two limits—one for constituency spending and one for national spending—or a single limit. In my evidence to the Neill committee, I argued in favour of a single limit encompassing constituency and national spending. The Neill committee seems to have got that the wrong way round. It believed that an integrated limit would allow parties to concentrate their spending even more on marginal seats; on the contrary, it would prevent parties from doing that because, once they had spent up to their limit in marginal seats, they could spend only in non-marginal seats. Applying the limit constituency by constituency would prevent the use of all the resources in 100 marginal seats. That would have the advantage of introducing the principle of equity between voters. Parties would have to treat the voters the same in every constituency. That point was made by the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan)—it sounds as though he represents three constituencies, but it is only one.

The Bill has missed an opportunity on individual donations. The main concerns have been about the source of donations, particularly overseas or undisclosed donations. However, people are equally concerned about the size of donations. We have only to look back a few years to the concern that was felt about donations to the Conservatives of £500,000 from Asil Nadir, a couple of million pounds from John Latsis and £5 million from Lord Kirkham. To match those sums, my party could not but accept donations of a similar magnitude. I am sure that Conservative Members will point out if I fail to do so that we accepted a £1 million donation from Bernie Ecclestone and, I believe, £2 million from Lord Sainsbury.

No matter how well intentioned, a party that relies on large individual donations will always feel beholden to the big donors, nervous of offending them and anxious not to jeopardise a repeat donation. If not in the minds of the party then in the minds of the public, that reliance will inevitably compromise the party's integrity. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred in his speech to an unhealthy reliance on a handful of wealthy donors. The way to avoid that is to ensure that the limit of what parties can spend is within the reach of what their supporters can raise without recourse to million pound donations. That is why the definition of permissible donations under clause 48 onwards should be tightened through the application of an upper limit on individual donations of £250,000.

The Neill report argues against an upper limit on two grounds. The first is that disclosure should contain the arms race between the main parties. Disclosure will deter a few would-be donors, but there is no evidence from other countries that it will stop, or even contain, the arms race. Disclosure is important, but it does not go far enough.

The second argument is that it would be easy to evade the limit by spreading resources among friends or setting up subsidiary companies. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) made that point. That ignores the simple counter-measures that can be taken to enforce limits on donations. Quebec has successfully enforced its $3,000 limit on donations by insisting that every donation must be made by personal cheque and making it an offence to hand on a donation from somebody else. There are stories about lobster parties at which one firm buys up a table and gives every executive £3,000 to donate, but it is difficult to get round such limits.

The main argument against a limit on donations in the past has been that, whereas one might want to limit individual donations, one might not want to limit donations from companies, trade unions or other political parties. At that time, it would have been difficult to make the distinction. Now, company donations are subject to shareholder ballots, parties are subject to the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998 and trade unions are subject to political fund ballots. There is no longer a difficulty in isolating individual donations and applying a limit to them that does not apply to other categories.

Clause 63, the Northern Ireland exemption, must be considered carefully by Ministers because it could drive a coach and horses through the Bill. If a list of permissible donors were to include registered voters in the Republic of Ireland—to which I have no objection—those voters would not be subject to clause 54, on the evasion of restrictions. The clause could be used as a channel for donations from abroad—or from within the UK—which would then become anonymous donations.

The definition of a Northern Ireland party in the Bill would mean that donations could be made only to parties represented at Stormont or representing Northern Ireland seats at Westminster. That would exclude some parties. However, we should remember that the Conservative party and the Green party contest elections in Northern Ireland, and that the Conservative party came within 2,000 votes of winning a seat in Northern Ireland in 1992. There is every possibility that it will win enough seats to qualify as a Northern Ireland party in the future.

I have no reason to believe that anyone is planning to use the loophole. However, if donations can be made which are not subject to the registration of donors, it is clear that it will be easy to evade the effects of the Bill—not only by Irish people overseas, but by donors of all kinds who will use it as a way into the British political system.

On overseas voters, clause 48 says that any individual is a permissible donor provided that he or she is

"registered in an electoral register".

The Neill committee is rather contradictory on this point. On the one hand, it has put forward a much looser definition—that anyone can give money if he or she is a registered voter or eligible to be put on an electoral register. That would include millions of people overseas. On the other hand, the committee has enunciated exactly the right principle—that it is right to take the opportunity to lay down the principle that those who live, work and carry on business in the UK should be the persons exclusively entitled to support financially the operation of the political process here. In other words, only people who live and work in this country should be allowed to fund

our elections. That would mean that tax exiles who do not live here would not be entitled to give money to political parties in Britain.

I welcome clause 130, which reduces the qualifying period for overseas voters from 20 years to 10. The Home Affairs Committee—of which I am a member—recommended that the figure be reduced to five years, and the Home Secretary has met us more than half way. Having listened to the representations of some of those who currently register as overseas voters and who may still have close links with this country, I think that the reduction is probably far enough.

Under the new rolling register provisions of the Representation of the People Bill, whereas in the past it would take anything between four and 16 months to register as a voter in this country, it will take in future between two and four weeks. It will be much easier for people who live for brief periods in this country between foreign postings to re-establish their connection as voters.

I still question whether it is right to make being registered to vote a sufficient qualification for giving money to political parties. After all, it is possible to be registered as a voter in this country and at the same time to be a foreign resident, a foreign dual national, a foreign taxpayer and even—as we have seen recently—a representative of a foreign Government.

It seems anomalous to allow people to fund political parties in this country if they are not liable to pay tax here. Why should they be able to influence the tax that we pay if they do not pay tax themselves? I would support an amendment that separated the issue of making declarable donations from overseas from the issue of voting, and I would introduce a second qualification—that permissible donors should be ordinarily resident in this county. That is the main criterion used by the Inland Revenue for deciding whether someone is resident in this country, and the same is true of the health service.

Clause 10 allows the commission to make policy development grants of up to £2 million a year. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham that that limit is far too low. I would suggest that it should be at least £10 million if it is to be in any way meaningful. Clause 10 also allows grants to be made only to parties with two Members who have taken the oath or the affirmation. It is not clear why that should be so, and it seems to be a mean-spirited attempt to make sure that one particular party from Northern Ireland does not benefit in any way from what is offered.

We must take a longer view on party funding. The Home Secretary referred to the law in Quebec, which is one of the only places in the world which really applies, and has developed, the spirit of our Corrupt Practices Act 1883 and turned it into something meaningful. Quebec applies the measure with unusual vigour. I have said that individual donations are limited, and what the press can and cannot do during an election is strictly controlled. There is, to be sure, an exemption for the press, but it is interpreted much more narrowly than in this country. Quebec has shown that that it is possible to control spending even in referendums, so that both sides of the argument feel that they cannot take advantage of having more money. Quebec has shown what it is to insist that politics should be conducted on a level playing field.

Those who refer to third parties must decide how they view elections. To my mind, elections are, by their very nature, periods during which those who are not candidates must accept a certain temporary restraint on their freedom of speech; otherwise, money will always be able to buy elections. The whole purpose of the Bill is to try to avoid that.

In my report for the IPPR, I made some other suggestions for ways in which we could ensure a level playing field in politics without introducing direct state funding. Those ideas included: state aid in kind; poster space to be allocated to the parties in a fair way at the beginning of elections; that that should be paid for; that newspaper advertising should be allocated in a fair way also; and that there should be more free postal deliveries. There are many ways in which we can improve the system.

We must remember that it was the beggar-my-neighbour policies of parties in the 1970s, who thought that it would be an advantage to do without any reform of party funding, that led them to scrape the bottom of the barrel for funding because their own sources of funding were drying up. That has so discredited all political parties and their funding that the public would find it unacceptable to have state funding in terms of cash donations from their taxes to political parties—a reluctance that one can well understand.

This country is practically the only country in Europe or north America that does not have state funding of parties, and that has led indirectly to the discrediting of politics. I do not advocate state funding now, but we must move towards a situation where people in this country have more faith in the political system and in the integrity of their political parties. Perhaps one day in the future the House will be able to introduce what is needed—a much more secure financial basis for political parties that will make the sleaze and corruption of recent years unnecessary.

8.10 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): My party welcomes the Bill. It represents an improvement, or a move towards one, in how political parties conduct themselves. It will boost the public's confidence, which has been so badly undermined in recent years.

Before the Scottish Parliament elections, the parties reached an agreement largely based on the Neill recommendations and included the provisions in a statutory instrument, which seems to have worked well. Neill felt that the political arrangements in Scotland were best handled by

"appropriate modifications to our main recommendations".

I seek a reassurance that, when the composition of the Electoral Commission and the Speaker's Committee is being decided, the different interests and political structures in Scotland and the other devolved areas will be taken into account.

I note that two of the statutory members of the Speaker's Committee will be the Westminster Minister with responsibility for local government—presumably that means local government in England and Wales—and the Home Secretary, neither of whom has a large locus in either Scotland or the other devolved parts of the United Kingdom.

The policy development grants seem to relate to policy on all matters for places such as Scotland: devolved as well as reserved. The smaller parties—smaller, I hasten

[Mr. Alasdair Morgan]

to add, in Westminster—need to be considered. I noticed that, when the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) spoke of how the money would be divvied up, he worked on the basis of a division by three. I assume that that was simply for arithmetic ease.

Allocation is often made on the basis of representation in the House, but the cost of research is not proportional to a party's membership or number of seats in the Chamber. It may cost the Liberal Democrats as much as it costs the Labour party to develop a housing policy, for example. We must be careful about the criteria that are used in the allocation of moneys under the scheme. That is especially important in the devolved parts of the United Kingdom, as the representation in the devolved Chambers is certainly not similar to that in Westminster.

I welcome, in clause 31, the help for parties towards the cost of complying with the various strictures of the legislation. The raising of the de minimis level from £50 to £200 will certainly reduce the costs of compliance, and that is welcome. I note that the Bill refers to the cost of installing software and even the provision of software by the Electoral Commission. I emphasise again that the cost of administering the consequences of the Bill is not necessarily in proportion to a party's representation in Westminster.

Classifying a permissible voter as one who is on the electoral register means that the headquarters of every party will have to have the registers for the entire country, or at least all those parts of it in which they are interested, presumably in electronic format. It is certainly not the practice in Scotland for the assessor or registrar to give out compact discs or floppy discs free with the register. Perhaps an amendment could be made to ensure that party headquarters are able to get computerised versions of the registers each year as they are issued, without having to bear the cost.

I have a problem with the definition of a permissible voter as one who is on the register, as opposed to the Neill recommendation that it should be someone who is entitled to be on the register. I realise that the concept of a rolling register minimises the problem to some extent, as does the fact that the requirement applies only to those who donate above the de minimis limit of £200, but I have a problem in principle with a formulation that, in theory, debars a substantial number of our citizens from donating to a political party. The latest estimate from the 1991 census shows that about 3 million people were not on the register.

Mr. Peter Bradley: Does the hon. Gentleman concede that it is a strange principle that somebody should be entitled to fund a party for which he or she is not prepared to vote?

Mr. Morgan: It is not up to me to try to explain the decisions of individual citizens. People may decide not to register for religious reasons, for example, and they should not be excluded from giving money to a party if they so choose. The Neill recommendation would be as easy to administer and would avoid the problem.

Clause 44 and schedule 4 concern the returning of accounts from a party's different accounting units, which can go down as far as the individual ward and branch. I am glad that no financial return is to be required if the year's transactions in the unit amount to less than £25,000. As a former national treasurer, and subsequently secretary, of my party, I know the difficulty of getting information from several hundred ward organisations. The problems that I faced would pale into insignificance beside those involved in collecting information required on a statutory basis.

I note that the commission has the power to require returns from such accounting units, and I seek an assurance that such a power would be used only in exceptional circumstances, when somebody thought that the provision was being used to fiddle the books.

Recommendation 38 of the Neill committee suggested that tax relief should be allowed on small donations. I understand what the hon. Member for Rotherham and others said about that being more of a benefit to the Conservative party than to other parties representing some of the poorer constituencies—the average income is fairly low in my rural constituency—but I tend towards the Neill committee's view that it is important to encourage small donors to be the mainstay of political parties, as tax relief would do. It is perhaps a lost opportunity not to have implemented the recommendation.

I welcome the controls on election expenditure by political parties. It has already been pointed out that the Representation of the People Act 1983 has long been a farce. Candidates jump through hoops worrying whether they have spent too much on telegrams, whatever they may be, while the parties spend millions of pounds without any controls. We need to avoid being in the same situation as the United States faces.

A cynic might say that the limits set out in the schedules in connection with various elections are those that will suit the larger parties. The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), who is not a cynic, certainly made that point, and the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) also alluded to it. In Scotland, for example, the limit for a general election will be £2,160,000. In Scottish Parliament elections, the limit will be £1,516,000. I will not give away any state secrets if I say that the SNP will be in no danger of breaching either limit. We must ask why the limits are so high and who will benefit from that.

I also have a problem with the provisions on third parties and their expenditure and I echo the points made by the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) and the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead). A limit will be placed on what each third party can spend, but there will be no limit overall on what third parties can spend. I accept that some third parties may spend money that is not identifiable with any particular party, but the reality is that third parties more and more spend money that definitely relates to the campaign of one party. A trade union, for example, may run a campaign that appears to favour two Opposition parties equally, but in reality we know that it is targeted in favour of one party. A strong case can be made to include third-party contributions in the overall total of a party's spending and the Electoral Commission should be allowed to make a judgment on whether a third-party campaign has contributed towards a party's expenditure.

Clause 122 provides for limits on expenditure in by-elections. I accept what the Minister said, and I know from my own experience that the limits in by-elections have been stretched on some occasions. However, the new

limit of £100,000 is on the high side, especially in Scotland where the electorate in each constituency is smaller than in constituencies south of the border. Setting the limit as high as £100,000 will allow the larger and wealthier parties to influence disproportionately the outcome in by-elections, which—as hon. Members have said—can be crucial in the run-up to general elections.

The potentially retrospective nature of other provisions in the Bill will also cause problems, because we will not know in advance the date of the general election. The arguments in favour of a fixed-term Parliament are strong, and that would fix the problem. Those arguments are strengthened by the fact that we now have that very system in the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, and this House, could learn from those examples.

It strikes me that, as with so much legislation, we will not get the Bill right first time. We can try to enforce restrictions on political parties and other people who wish to influence the course of political debate, but they will spend time—people are probably doing so even as we speak—working out ways to get round those restrictions. We have made an important start, but we will have to be prepared to come back to the issue as people find ways to get round the restrictions and to subvert democracy.

8.24 pm

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): When the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) commended my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) on the civilised way in which he voiced his hostility to some of the positions on party funding adopted by the Conservative party, the right hon. Gentleman may have been issuing an anticipatory reprimand to me because, although I am attracted by the spirit of consensus that has prevailed today, I can see little justification for it. The principles that Opposition Members have enunciated are not borne out by their practices.

When I challenged the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) in an intervention earlier, he suggested that the Conservative party conforms to the recommendations that the Neill committee published some time ago. I do not believe that to be the case. He may have misunderstood my intervention and I may have misunderstood his response, but the chairman of the Conservative party was quoted in *The Times* on 24 November as saying:

> "The Conservative party has always made it clear that it would operate by its guidelines until such a time as Parliament might introduce new guidelines."

In other words, the Conservative party does not conform to the recommendations of the Neill committee, nor does it conform to the proposals set out in the Bill. That should be a cause of grave concern to the House.

The Bill is necessary for all the reasons that have been eloquently expressed this evening. We need to render our political process transparent and our political parties accountable. We need to eliminate undue influence, or the perception of it, on the way in which we conduct our political affairs. We desperately and urgently need to restore public confidence in our political system. In too many parts of the country, indifference to our political system is giving way to alienation and disaffection. We saw that in the low turnouts in the recent European and local elections. Scepticism about politicians' ability to make a positive difference to the daily lives of our constituents too often gives way to cynicism about our preparedness to do so or to serve in the public interest.

The Bill will contribute to rehabilitating our political system, as will other constitutional reforms, including not least the reform of the upper Chamber. However, we cannot deny that our political system has been a victim of the extraordinary degradation of politics and politicians in recent years. The problem is that, even if it can be shown that sleaze was a problem principally of the previous Government and the Conservative party, when one political party is brought low, we all suffer, because our political system is degraded. It will be restored only if all political parties act in concert to restore it, which is why I am concerned at the apparent chasm that still exists, despite the speeches of consensus tonight, between the Conservative party on the one hand and the Government's proposals in the Bill and the Neill committee recommendations on the other. I hope that the Conservative spokesman will take the opportunity when he winds up to disabuse me of that apprehension.

The Conservative party is largely responsible for the public's perception that sleaze, both individual and collective, attends our political system. One does not have to do research in the Library to support that contention, because we have had reminders in the very recent past. There is Lord Archer—until recently, I understand, a man of "probity" and "integrity". The Conservative party fell out of love with the man long before it was prepared to part company with his cheque book. That is not to its credit. I need not go into detail about the Hamilton case, because we are all familiar with it. The same applies to Jonathan Aitken, who started by buckling on the shield of truth and has finished up by strapping on the electronic tagging device of perjury.

Whenever the Conservative party is asked, "Will you open the box or take the money?", it opts to take the money. It has been prepared to take money from anyone, anywhere, in any currency, in any denomination, in brown envelopes—however it comes—with no questions asked and no explanations offered or given.

Mr. Robathan: In many ways, I am loth to intervene in such a silly and partisan attack on a collection of people. There may have been individuals in the Conservative party who have misbehaved, as there have been in the Labour party and other parties. I hold no brief for corrupt politicians, of whom there are remarkably few in any party.

The hon. Gentleman attacks us collectively, which I resent. Will he will urge the Labour party, and all organisations within it, to return money to the creditors of TransTec if it turns out that some of the money that should go to them has found its way into the Labour party's coffers?

Mr. Bradley: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting debating point. I think that he is anticipating events to a large extent. When he intervened earlier in the debate, he mentioned the name of Bernie Ecclestone. That is a very good example, because although, as far as I understand it, no wrongdoing was ever sustained against the Labour party, the very perception that there may have been a question mark against that donation caused the Labour party to refer the matter to Lord Neill's committee and to accept its recommendation to return the donation.

[Mr. Bradley]

Conservative Members have said that they are at one with us on the principles of the Bill, but—I speak more in sorrow than in anger—their actions belie that commitment. I see no evidence that the Conservative party has ever returned money. It did not return Asil Nadir's donation. It has certainly not taken the trouble even to refer the Michael Ashcroft controversy to its own ethics and integrity committee. Try as he will, the hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways.

Mr. Robathan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bradley: If it is a brief point.

Mr. Robathan: Could the hon. Gentleman enumerate the cases in which Lord Neill has suggested that money should be returned from the Conservative party to anyone else? Lord Neill—I think that it was Lord Neill—instructed the Labour party to return the £1 million donated by Bernie Ecclestone in order to ensure that tobacco sponsorship was allowed for Formula One racing.

Mr. Bradley: I am happy to respond to the hon. Gentleman's point. I shall return in my speech to Lord Neill. I suspect that he has never asked, suggested, recommended or instructed the Conservative party to return funds to non-permissible sources because it has never referred to him for advice on the money that it receives—in stark contrast to the behaviour of the Labour party. That is why the public holds the Labour party in greater esteem than the Conservative party. Until the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues learn that lesson, we shall continue to seek to teach it to them.

Let me quote from a letter to the Neill committee, dated 30 January 1998, from the then deputy chairman of the Conservative party, the hon. Member for Windsor (Mr. Trend). He said:

"Until the Leader of the Conservative Party's speech on the 23rd July 1997, the Party had no specific rules covering the receipt of foreign donations, except that we had made it clear that we did not accept donations from foreign governments or rulers."

That clearly did not exclude the United Nations ambassadors of foreign Governments. The letter continues:

"As a consequence, we did not record separately donations that were received from overseas."

That startling omission supports my view that the Conservative party is prepared to take money from anyone, in any currency and any denomination.

It is clear that the Conservative party received massive overseas funding throughout the 1990s. It received £10 million in the run-up to the previous general election alone, and £16 million between the elections of 1992 and 1997. I derive those figures from the Conservative party's own published accounts. There were 47 overseas donations in that period at an average of £345,000. Twenty per cent. of all donations of more than £100,000 received by the Conservative party came from overseas sources.

Other hon. Members have referred to the identity of some of those generous sources of funding. They include Sir Y.K. Pao and Mr. C.K. Ma of Hong Kong; John Latsis, the ship owner; and Asil Nadir. What did they want? What did they think that their contributions to the then party of Government's fighting fund would confer on them? That question was posed eloquently by the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell).

However, much more interesting than what they sought is what they got for their money. Throughout that period and beyond, the Conservative party refused to regulate its affairs. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) said that, when the opportunity existed for the previous Government to ask Lord Neill or his predecessor, Lord Nolan, to examine precisely those matters on which he has now reported and which form the basis of the Bill, they declined it. We are entitled to ask why the Conservative party, in that period and subsequently, refused self-regulation. That is why it is so necessary that legislation be introduced that will require, by statute, the Conservative party to submit to regulation.

Lord McAlpine, a previous Conservative party treasurer, stated, not under pressure from Jeremy Paxman but in his autobiography:

"The Conservative Central Office is not a charity dedicated to helping the sick and suffering".

That might be news to some, but we all knew it, and, by 1997, the electors had certainly woken up to it. He went on to state that

"it is a fighting machine dedicated to winning elections. I believe it to be the height of folly to expose how such a machine manages its resources or, indeed, how large or small these resources are at any one time."

The former Conservative party treasurer was clearly saying no to regulation, clarity, transparency, accountability and scruples.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): Would the hon. Gentleman concede that Lord McAlpine clearly told the Neill committee that no one who gave money to the Conservative party had influence over its policies, and that the party chairman was seen to tear his hair out? I quote from the Neill report itself.

Mr. Bradley: If the hon. Gentleman tells me that Lord McAlpine said that, I am sure that he said it. However, I am more interested in what has happened since 1997 than before. I believe that matters have gone from bad to worse. The lack of values set out by Lord McAlpine is in stark contrast to what he has said about the current treasurer of the Conservative party. Lord McAlpine said that the current treasurer would take up that post "over my dead body". I wonder what he meant by that.

However, it is extraordinary that the current Conservative party treasurer is also its principal donor and the leading fund raiser for the party. With extraordinary irony, the Bill will mean that he will be the accounting officer, or regulator, for the party, too.

What is known about the recent record of Mr. Michael Ashcroft and the Conservative party exemplifies why the Bill is so necessary, and makes it clear why the Conservatives have resisted its provisions until they have no choice. I want to spend a few minutes explaining not only why Mr. Ashcroft is an inappropriate person to be treasurer of the Conservative party, but why he is a non-permissible source.

The former deputy chairman of the Conservative party, the hon. Member for Windsor, told the Neill inquiry that the party's approach to foreign funding had changed with

the election of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) to the leadership. In his speech accepting that post, the right hon. Gentleman said:

"We must be open about our funding. In not being so in the past, we have often appeared secretive and defensive. And we have paid a political price for that. It is time to be much more open. We have nothing to hide and nothing to fear.

But I want to go further than that. We have to recognise public concern across the Western world about the sources of funding for political parties. We must respond to that concern. We will publish new guidance later this year"—

he was speaking in 1997—

"and our intention is that in future years the Conservative Party will no longer accept foreign donations."

Thus the right hon. Gentleman put it on the record in 1997 that those guidelines would be published.

Lord Parkinson, who was then chairman of the Conservative party, told the Neill committee:

"since the last election we have had no donations which we have even had to wonder whether they could be classified as foreign".

The Conservative party's formal evidence to the committee made the same unequivocal assertion. It said:

"Although we have no reason to believe that any money received by the Party in the past should not have been accepted, Mr Hague has made it clear that in future we will not accept foreign donations. No such donations have been offered or received since the General Election."

What is Michael Ashcroft if he is not a foreign donor? Let us consider his attachment to the United Kingdom. He is non-resident; he is a non-taxpayer; he is the owner of a foreign bank; he is the holder of a foreign nationality; he is the diplomatic representative of a foreign Government and the funder of a foreign political party. How much more foreign can one get?

I put that point in what I thought were civilised terms in a letter to the leader of the Conservative party as long ago as April last year. The reply that I received from the current chairman of the Conservative party was succinct and very much to the point. He said:

"I can assure you that the matters to which you refer in relation to donations are fully consistent with our stated rules."

In 1997, the leader of the Conservative party said that the Conservative party would publish its guidelines for foreign funding and, in 1999, the chairman of the same party told me that it had "stated rules". What are those stated rules? How do they conform, as the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire said that they do, to the Neill proposals? How close are the proposals of those on the Conservative Front Bench to the proposals set out in the Bill?

All the attempts that I have made to prize out of the Conservative party a copy of those guidelines have failed. I suggest that that is simply because they do not exist or because they certainly did not exist until they were cobbled together very hurriedly last November in response to continuing inquiries from *The Independent* and *The Times*. I am not altogether surprised that the Conservative party is now hastily covering its tracks. Its leader says that it will not take foreign funding but the hon. Member for Windsor says that it does. In the hon. Gentleman's letter of 30 January 1998 to the Neill committee, he says:

"amounts from overseas bank accounts are recorded as foreign donations".

In other words, the donations that the Conservative party has received from the Belize Bank Trust company are classified as foreign donations, yet the Conservative party says that it does not accept foreign donations. The acceptance of the substantial funding that the Conservative party receives from Mr. Michael Ashcroft via the Belize Bank Trust company not only contravenes the Conservatives' own, and as yet unpublished, guidelines but clearly contravenes Lord Neill's recommendations.

For the avoidance of doubt, I wrote to Lord Neill in December and asked

" whether in principle a trust company based outside the United Kingdom and, indeed, the European Community would constitute a permissible source of funding."

On 22 December, Lord Neill wrote back to say:

"I draw your attention in particular to Recommendation 26"—

of his committee's report—

"which states, inter alia, that only companies incorporated in the UK should be a 'permissible source' of company donations."

Clearly, the Belize bank is not in that category. As I have said, Mr. Ashcroft's donations, on which the Conservative party in a large part depends, are counter to both the spirit and the letter of the Neill recommendations and the provisions of the Bill. The Conservative party knows that.

I also asked Lord Neill whether he had received in submission from the Conservative party a copy of the guidelines to which the party chairman so frequently refers and whether Lord Neill had offered any advice on them. In the same letter to me, he said:

"To the best of my knowledge there have been no communications in which this Committee has given advice to the Conservative Party about its own internal guidelines on foreign funding."

As I hinted earlier, that is either because the guidelines do not exist or because the Conservative party does not wish to risk the criticism that would follow if it submitted its questionable guidelines to the Neill committee.

I have a number of questions. It is, perhaps, unusual to ask questions of those on the Opposition Front Bench, but they will shortly have an opportunity to respond. I should like a clear answer to this question: will the Conservative party adopt the Neill committee recommendations in the way that the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire suggested that it already had? If it will not adopt those recommendations and embrace the provisions of the Bill, will the Conservative party finally publish the guidelines that steer its approach to foreign funding, which the Leader of the Opposition said he would publish in 1997 and the chairman of the party says are already enshrined in stated rules?

Will the Conservatives explain why their practice does not conform to Neill's recommendations? To satisfy the hon. Member for Blaby, and if there is any doubt in their minds, will they refer the matter to the Neill committee? If necessary, are they prepared to repay to Mr. Michael Ashcroft the donations that he has made, and continues to make?

While they are on the subject—I am sure that there is a great deal of interest in this issue—will the Conservatives let us know whether the police are still pursuing the investigations that they were supposed to have mounted last year into the apparent raiding of the records of the Conservative party accounts at the Royal Bank of Scotland, or has that piece of propaganda quietly subsided into the sands?

[Mr. Bradley]

The wheel has come full circle. In my view, the Conservative party is as sleaze-ridden in this Parliament as it was in the previous one. There were no guidelines before 1997—that much is apparent from what Conservatives have said—and I believe that there have been none since. There were foreign donations before 1997. I believe that foreign donations have been accepted ever since.

The undertakings given by the Leader of the Opposition on the issue are pure opportunism and hypocrisy. It has been business as usual. The Conservative party has dragged British politics into disrepute. That is why the Bill is needed, and it has taken a Labour Government to provide it, whether the Conservative party likes it or not.

In closing, I shall comment briefly on the provisions of the Bill, which I welcome, although I have some reservations. In clauses 45 and 46, I see no reference to the benefits that political parties derive from the underwriting of loans and the guaranteeing of bank overdrafts by third parties. That can be a benefit far greater than even the most significant donation, depending on the size of the debt or overdraft. I see no definition in those clauses that would catch that as a donation.

It is important to ensure that, in cases where donations are returned as impermissible sources of funds, no benefit should be derived during the 30-day qualification period. For example, a very large donation could attract a large amount of interest in the 30-day period before it is returned to a non-permissible source. I hope that we will close that loophole. Similarly, any forfeiture of impermissible donations should include any benefit derived from interest payments.

I am concerned, and others have mentioned it too, about the difficulty of policing the onus on donors of multiple amounts of less than £200 to declare their accumulated funding. If someone donates £199 a day on a standing order, by the end of the year he will have donated £70,000—a significant sum.

Most importantly, I am concerned about the reduction in clause 130 of the qualifying period for overseas electors from 20 to 10 years. It surely cannot be the purpose of the Bill to prevent British residents overseas from making legitimate donations. I am thinking, for example, of people who have dedicated a life to the British economy, paid taxes throughout their working life, and retired to the sunshine of Spain, and who wish to maintain contact with the political party that they support and the political scene in Britain. It cannot be the intention of the Bill to deprive them of that right.

The clause misses the point. I do not believe that hard-working UK taxpayers will understand or accept that someone who pays no UK tax should be allowed to influence British politics. That important point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton).

If people purposefully remove their assets from this country to avoid paying UK tax—I am not suggesting that they are breaking the law in any way—they should forgo their right to influence the British political agenda. Others have alluded to the clear principle that there should be no representation without taxation. I hope that the Government will table amendments in Committee to ensure that those who are entitled to fund UK political parties are registered to vote here and, unless retired, liable to pay tax.

With those and the other amendments that I and other hon. Members have mentioned, the Bill will do the job that the British electorate expect of it. The Bill may not prevent the Conservatives or, it must be said, any other political party from taking money from unsavoury sources, but at least the British electorate will know who pays the piper. They will at last be able to exercise their judgment and cast their vote according not only to the stated policy in a party manifesto but to the company that the party keeps.

8.51 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I have not come here to attack the Labour party, but it is customary to say something nice about the speech preceding one's own and I shall not do so today. Under the cover of privilege in this House, I could make many allegations about the Labour party, individual party members and Labour Members of Parliament. Generally, however, I consider them to be a misguided but well-meaning bunch of people with whom I disagree.

I might go on, but I shall not be too rude about the speech of the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) except to say that he should dwell on what he has done. Perhaps he thinks that he will reap a few more votes in The Wrekin, but I think that the good burghers there will see the error of their ways, oust him at the next election and return a Conservative.

I shall comment on what the hon. Gentleman said about donations always influencing the way in which parties react. He mentioned Asil Nadir. What exactly did Asil Nadir get from the Conservative Government as he fled to Cyprus to escape British judgment? Absolutely nothing. Closer to home, in my constituency, somebody who supported the Conservative party said to me, "I have given all this money to the Conservative party, and I don't get anything for my planning applications." I replied, "Well, no. What did you expect?" He may have expected something, but I can assure the hon. Member for The Wrekin that that person got nothing because donations do not, as he tried to say, always mean influence. They may get someone a hearing, but they certainly do not get influence.

This party, like the Labour party and other parties in the House, has very little to apologise for in general, although some individuals may have erred.

The problem of speaking late in a debate is that all the best arguments have already been made. I do not intend to bore the House by repeating the arguments made by some of my right hon. and hon. Friends, which have been extremely good. I shall concentrate instead on referendums. The House may recall that I introduced the Referendums Bill last year. It was talked out by the Government, acting, as the hon. Member for The Wrekin will know, altruistically without any consideration of their own interests.

I welcome the Bill, particularly the provisions for referendums, but with qualifications. The Government have, I fear, included provisions that I view with a certain amount of suspicion. Even Labour Members may agree that the Government like to be in control, particularly of elections. Whereas an election or referendum is a chance for people to express their feelings democratically, Labour Members may agree that, for some in Millbank, an election is more of a chance to find out whether they can meddle a little.

Those who do not agree might ask the hon. Members for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) or for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) about the arrangements put in place for selecting the Labour candidate for the mayor of London or choosing the candidate for the First Secretary of the Welsh Assembly. Nationally, almost everybody—even most members of the Labour party—disliked the closed party lists used for elections to the European Parliament, which were debated at length in the House. One further example is that of the Welsh devolution referendum, in which a large majority of the Welsh population did not vote for devolution. The Government created the Welsh Assembly none the less.

I welcome the creation of an Electoral Commission to take Government interference out of referendums. In the spirit of bipartisanship, I acknowledge that all Governments, not only the Labour Government, might feel the urge to interfere. I believe that the commission will be able to enforce many of the recommendations made by Lord Neill and his committee. I should like to make a few suggestions regarding the powers of the commission set out in clause 5, which states:

"The Commission shall . . . submit reports to the Secretary of State on . . . such matters relating to referendums . . . as the Commission may so determine".

I hope that the Minister will say whether my suggestions fall within the commission's remit.

My first suggestion is that the commission should make recommendations on the wording of any question to be asked in a referendum. Those who, like the hon. Member for The Wrekin, follow such matters closely will know that, in February 1975, NOP ran a poll asking a series of questions in respect of the Common Market. I do not always believe opinion polls, even though, sadly, the events of May 1997 show that they tend to be right. However, the 1975 poll is illustrative in that, on a factually incorrect question, it managed to garner a majority among respondents in favour of leaving the Common Market. On another question, it managed to get an 18 per cent. majority in favour of staying in the Common Market. As the House will know, the eventual result of the referendum was approximately two to one in favour of staying in. That demonstrates something that we all know: the wording of a question can dictate the result of a referendum in favour of the person who has set the question. Therefore, I recommend that the Electoral Commission should have the opportunity to comment, and make recommendations, on the wording of any referendum question.

My next suggestion is that a voting threshold should be included in any future referendum. The House will remember that there was a threshold in the 1979 referendum on Scottish devolution. Earlier today, regional assemblies—a matter that leaves every one of my constituents cold—were mentioned. I doubt that they would turn out to vote on the establishment of an east midlands regional assembly. We should set a threshold before establishing such bodies. The Welsh Assembly was created on the approval of only one quarter of the Welsh electorate, so no one can pretend that the Welsh desperately wanted it.

Another matter for the commission should be the timing of separate but related referendums. The House might not think that an important issue, but if we want to remove political expediency from the calculations underlying referendums, we should consider how the Welsh referendum was held exactly one week after the Scottish one. The Government allege that they were held on separate days to avoid confusion, but most people in all parties would agree that the Scottish vote, which was rightly expected to be heavily in favour of devolution, was thought likely to influence the Welsh vote. The House will note that there appears to have been no confusion about holding separate elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and local authorities on the same day last year, nor about county council elections and a general election coinciding on occasions in the past and, no doubt, in future.

The question of spending limits has already been discussed at length, but it is worth recalling a little of the convoluted route by which we arrived at the current position. The White Paper suggested a limit of £5 million for each umbrella organisation and each political party with more than two Members of Parliament. Those proposals were widely regarded as being unfair. For example, if we were to hold a referendum on entry to a European single currency, the yes campaign would be able to spend £25 million and the no campaign only £10 million, based on current party positions. We and others, including Lord Neill, criticised those proposals, and the Home Secretary had to abandon what many perceived to be a partisan attempt to influence funding for a future referendum on a single currency.

Under the new sliding scale rules that the Bill introduces, the figures come out better. My calculations show that the yes campaign in a single currency referendum would be able to spend approximately £14 million, and the no campaign approximately £10.5 million. That is much more equitable.

We should also consider a point of principle: referendum spending limits should not be based on how well a party did in a previous general election. The point of a referendum is to determine what was not decided at a general election. The referendum is an instrument for teasing out a specific large issue from the rest of the issues that were decided by a previous general election. Making spending limits in a referendum campaign dependent on the way in which people voted in a general election replaces the issue among the others that had previously been decided. That negates the purpose of a referendum.

If a general election is not adequate for making a decision on a specific issue, why should it be adequate for determining the amount of money that can be spent on deciding the issue? Why should people's view of the Labour Government's stealth taxes at the next general election determine the number of leaflets that they receive about the euro in a referendum after the election?

My colleagues, especially my right hon. Friends the Members for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), have made other comments on funding and capping. I believe that the proposals in the Bill remain flawed, but I shall not pursue that.

I want to consider briefly Government involvement in referendums. The Neill committee recommended that the Government of the day

"should, as a Government, remain neutral and should not distribute at public expense literature, even purportedly 'factual' literature, setting out or otherwise promoting its case."

It is interesting to ascertain why the committee said that. Evidence quoted in the report states that the Government,

[Mr. Andrew Robathan]

being on one side of the referendum in Scotland, was able to

"write the rules and an information leaflet and send it to every house."

The Neill committee agrees that it is fundamentally wrong for the Government to be a player and to write the rules. In the Scottish devolution campaign, the Government distributed information leaflets to every household. They omitted any argument in favour of a no vote. In Scotland, that Government propaganda cost £730,000.

In Wales, the Government spent £164,000 on the campaign. The Neill committee stated that it was "disturbed" by the "one-sided" referendum campaign, and added:

"A fairer campaign might well have resulted in a different outcome."

The committee had good cause to demand Government neutrality.

Unfortunately, the Bill does not provide for Government neutrality, which would prevent a Government from influencing a referendum. The Government have rejected Lord Neill's proposals and decided that neutrality should apply only for the final 28 days of a campaign. In a long-drawn-out campaign such as that on the single currency—I am sorry to use that example again, but it is pertinent—28 days of neutrality is laughable.

The Treasury is already spending £29 million on its euro preparations—more than the total that the yes and no campaigns will spend in a future referendum. The Minister for Europe is touring the country—appropriately with Eddie Izzard—in some sort of two-man show to persuade people of the benefits of a single currency and the European Union.

Government propaganda is aimed at making the last 28 days of any subsequent referendum campaign as unimportant as possible by creating a mood of resigned fatalism among the British public about the supposed inevitability of joining the euro. The 28 days of neutrality, after all the organs of state have weighed in for months, is an inadequate safeguard of a fair and balanced campaign. Government neutrality should start when the plan for a referendum is presented.

I generally welcome the Bill, but its provisions for referendums are flawed. I suspect that the Government cannot resist attempting to retain their control over all elections and referendums. The Minister may be delighted to know that I do not totally distrust them on these issues, notwithstanding the speech of the hon. Member for The Wrekin, but they have already held several referendums and are committed to holding more, not only on the euro but—possibly, probably or perhaps not—on proportional representation. I fear that the Bill is in danger of representing a missed opportunity for producing a generally fair framework for the succession of plebiscites that are already planned.

Various hon. Members have said that we may need to revisit the situation. That may be true, but I hope that some of the issues that have been raised can be ironed out in Committee. I have to say—I hope that the Minister will listen—that a Committee of the whole House should consider the Bill because this is a constitutional matter and it should be examined on the Floor of the House. I hope that the Committee will be given the opportunity to improve the Bill and, especially, to address the concerns that have been raised on this side of the House.

9.6 pm

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I add my welcome and support for the Bill, it has been a delight to hear so much support being expressed from both sides of the House, even with reservations such as those of the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). It is extremely encouraging that there is such widespread support and to hear such comments, although it is sad in many respects that such a Bill has had to be laid before the House. The primary reason for that is that we had reached a crisis point in terms of trust in politics and politicians in this country by the end of the previous Government's term of office.

When I came into politics some years ago as an unpaid lay councillor—I am sure that I do not need to tell you this, Mr. Deputy Speaker—it was a pastime that garnered some respect in the community, even at local councillor level. Our Member of Parliament 25 years ago, who was not of my political persuasion, enjoyed considerable respect, trust and confidence in the community, but there has been a gradual decline over the past 25 years. Unfortunately, over the past 10 years there has been a dramatic fall in confidence in politics and politicians among the general public and we have to put that right. The Bill puts us well on course to doing just that.

In 1992, not out of choice, I was obliged to leave the House for five years, but not as a result of the wishes of my constituents because the majority of them voted for me to remain their representative for another five years. A small proportion—people living in other lands—who had little association, if any, with my constituency decided to vote for someone else and put me out of office, but I was delighted to be re-elected with the biggest majority in my constituency in 50 years. That was partly a consequence of a lot of people feeling upset because they did not think that their voice—the local voice—counted.

I welcome the Bill with its transparency, which will go down well, and the limitations on expenditure. More than anything else, I welcome the restrictions on foreign donations and donations from foreign nationals. I wish only to draw attention to a couple of matters. The first is tax relief on donations. A number of arguments have been made today, but there is a simple point: if we have not accepted in the Bill the principle of general state support for political parties, we simply cannot accept tax relief on political donations. No matter what spin or gloss is put on it, it is a form of general state support for political parties so we should give that one short shrift.

The second matter, which concerns me greatly, is the danger of evasion of the restrictions on foreign donations. The Bill has had all-party support. Many parties, including the Conservative party, have already begun to embrace the Neill committee's recommendations. That is good, and we are on track and going in the right direction. Before the Bill becomes an Act, I hope that many, if not all, the parties in the House will have adopted many of these proposals.

However, I am concerned about a particular political party. The House may be surprised to hear that it is not the main Opposition party. One of the key

recommendations in the Neill report, which is implemented in the Bill, is the publication of accounts. That must be the first step towards transparency and openness in public accountability for the funding of political parties. One party in the House still has not published its accounts, and that is Plaid Cymru. Despite giving an undertaking to do so, the Welsh nationalists have failed to publish their accounts and, by that very act, they have undermined confidence in the political system in Wales in particular, and across the country.

It may or may not be a coincidence that Plaid Cymru has a secret dollar account in the United States of America. We do not know the value of that account containing donations made in north America, because the party does not publish its accounts. As far back as January 1996, the Welsh nationalists are on record as saying in the House that they would not accept any donations from foreign sources. Two of the most senior members of that party supported a ten-minute Bill to that effect.

We now discover advertisements in the north American press for donations towards the fighting funds of the so-called party for Wales—which has to go to north America for its funding. It is seeking funds and sources of funds to raise $250,000 for its war chest for the election, having given an assurance in the House and elsewhere that it would not accept donations from foreign nationals. When challenged, the Welsh nationalists say that they adhere to the Neill committee's recommendations and that they do not accept donations from anyone other than people entitled or registered to vote in this country. It does not say that in the adverts that appear in the north American press.

A point that must be raised in relation to the Bill is that we have no way of knowing whether Plaid Cymru has received donations from any source if at a later stage it says that it accepts donations only from people registered to vote in this country, as does its sister party. In fairness to the Scottish National party, its website makes it absolutely clear and states publicly that it will accept donations only from people registered to vote in this country. Plaid Cymru, the so-called party for Wales, does not do that. It has given two undertakings to provide information to prove that it is not receiving money from any foreign nationals based in north America, but it has yet to do so.

Plaid Cymru is making a big mistake. It is damaging politics in Wales, and damaging the reputation of the House. The Minister should reconsider clause 54 to ensure that we can enforce the regulations relating to donations that are not permissible from countries where our jurisdiction is limited. It is all very well for political parties to say one thing, if they are doing another.

Like all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, I warmly welcome the Bill.

9.15 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): It was a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) pay tribute to his predecessor, the late Sir Raymond Gower. I come from south Wales, and I well remember the respect in which Sir Raymond was held. The hon. Gentleman was right to suggest that such personal regard can have a massive effect on votes at a general election, but I would take that argument further, and draw an analogy with personal regard for the behaviour of a party. When such personal regard disappears—as it had undoubtedly disappeared for the Conservative Government by 1997—it, too, can have a massive effect in a general election.

Along with most of my colleagues, I welcome the Bill for the most part, but we should recognise the importance of having faith in the democratic process. It may be a bit rough and ready, and it may take some time to come into effect, but, at the end of the day, if a party behaves badly, it will be punished. I think that we in the House are mistaken if we feel that everything must be tied up in clauses, subsections and schedules, because eventually the British people will have their say. They will make their judgment, and deliver their verdict.

I assure the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan, and all hon. Members present, that plenty of Conservative Members are determined, by their examples, to try to restore the standing of Members of Parliament in the public perception, in the same way as the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues. That applies to new Conservative Members, and to those who were here during the last Parliament, and who viewed much of what happened then with dismay.

In the spirit of agreement that has permeated today's debate, I want to raise three issues. Two have been mentioned today; I have mentioned the other in a different context, but I believe that it is relevant to the Bill. My first point relates to the excellent speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). He mentioned the Neill committee's concern about the fact that the referendum for the establishment of the Welsh Assembly was almost even more one-sided than it turned out to be: only by sheer chance was there any financial support for the "no" campaign. That is why I agree with the Bill's provision that public money should be available for umbrella groups—up to £600,000 for each group on each side of the argument.

As I said in an earlier intervention—and as a number of hon. Members seemed to confirm by agreeing with me—we have a major problem with the provision imposing a cap on what individual pressure groups can spend from funds that they manage to raise privately. Naturally, if they are not members of umbrella groups, they will have to raise the funds privately. In my intervention, I explained that I used to run a campaigning pressure group, which, as the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) was kind enough to remind the House, dealt with nuclear weapons and the importance—as I saw it, and as it was seen by people who shared my beliefs—of retaining the nuclear deterrent in the climactic closing years of the cold war in the early and mid-1980s.

Let us suppose, for example—I believe that examples help to concentrate the mind—that, in 1983 or 1984, a referendum had been held on whether Britain should retain its independent nuclear deterrent. Let us suppose that the various groups campaigning in favour of either side of the argument had been able to raise a certain amount of money. I was running a group with the short and snappy title of the Coalition for Peace Through Security. Lady Olga Maitland, who later became a much respected and doughty Member of Parliament, was running another group with an equally short and snappy title: Women and Families for Defence, later truncated to Families for Defence.

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

What would we have done if we had been told that we could spend only a fraction of the money that we were able to raise? Let us say, for example, that we were allowed in that campaign to spend £10,000 per group and could have raised £30,000 each. What would we have done? I can tell hon. Members what I would have done. I would straight away have disbanded the Coalition for Peace Through Security and set up the coalition for peace, the coalition for security and, with all due deference to Lady Olga, the coalition for defence.

What would Lady Olga have done? She would have set up families for peace, families for defence and families for security. Straight away, we would each have trebled our capability to spend money, if we could raise it. It is manifestly obvious that such a restriction is no restriction at all.

No doubt the pro-nuclear disarmament lobby would have adopted similar tactics. It had plenty of groups. There was CND, Teachers for Peace, Women Opposed to the Nuclear Threat, Scientists Against Nuclear Extermination and even, notoriously, Babies Against the Bomb. Those would all have been able to subdivide and to replicate themselves ad nauseam. I do not see the hon. Member for Test disagreeing with that. I suspect that he was a member of at least some of those groups and knows that I am telling the truth. The Government have to deal with that problem because it is a meaningless restriction as it stands.

I turn to the point that was rightly highlighted in the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). My calculation slightly differed from his as to what money would have been available to political parties that were campaigning for and against the single currency, but the broad principle applies.

I calculated that, under the Government's original provisions, probably a £20 million limit would have been imposed on parties campaigning in favour of the single currency and only a £5 million limit would have been imposed on parties campaigning against it; that limit could possibly have been £10 million. However, from my calculations, it still appears that the limit for those campaigning in favour will be at least twice that for those campaigning against. That will lead to a disparity in the campaign resources that parties are able to spend.

Let us suppose, however, that the Conservative party and those who campaigned to retain the pound could raise more money than they were allowed to spend. What would happen under those circumstances? Do people honestly believe that that money would just remain in the pockets of potential donors, who had been willing to give it to the Conservative party to campaign to save the pound? I doubt it. They would find other avenues. It would go to other groups, bodies and organisations.

That is why the whole concept of putting caps on what may be spent by parties or groups in a referendum is fundamentally flawed. I am not alone in that opinion. I understand from my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) that that is precisely the reason why the Neill committee did not recommend capping the limits in that way.

I was particularly impressed by the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby—that the whole purpose of having a referendum is to cut across the normal party divisions that form in general election campaigns, and that determining how much each party should be able to spend in a referendum by its vote at the previous general election misses the whole point of creating special referendum arrangements.

Dr. Whitehead: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the American experience in propositions and referendums demonstrates an association between huge expenditure imbalances and outcomes? Is he saying that we should make no attempt to curtail such consequences and simply let rip, or that the system that the Government are proposing in the Bill requires amendment?

Dr. Lewis: It is obvious that the Government have taken a decision to reject the Neill approach, and it is not realistic to expect the Government to change their mind and remove the caps completely. However, I am still gravely dissatisfied with the effect of the sliding scale, which will give unequal potential to different parties to campaign on either side of a referendum question, and will give unfair advantages to one side of a referendum debate rather than another.

I shall be quite specific and use the example of economic and monetary union. I suspect that what is really behind the Government's actions and their original flawed scheme—which would have created a much greater disparity between the amounts spent for and against in a referendum campaign on membership of the single currency—is their knowledge that they have a mountain to climb.

Despite all the Government's effort to propagandise on the desirability, as they see it, of replacing the pound with the euro, the evidence of systematic polling has been that the gap in favour of keeping the pound has been widening, so that, currently, a massive majority of at least 64 per cent. of people are in favour of keeping the pound and rejecting the single currency. Therefore, the cause of adopting the single currency is almost as unpopular as the cause of unilateral nuclear disarmament—supported by the hon. Member for Test—was in the 1980s.

The Government, therefore, even using their ability to spend more money on their side of the argument, will have great difficulty in turning that opinion around. For the sake of a hard case, they are in danger of making a bad law.

In my last couple of minutes, I should like to refer very briefly to an issue that I raised on 30 November, in the debate on Second Reading of the Representation of the People Bill, on the need to close a loophole that affected me in the general election campaign, when I was a parliamentary candidate, and provable lies were broadcast against me personally on the internet with the intention of damaging my vote.

On the same day, I discussed the matter with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) and I received an indication—which has been renewed since, in a letter that he sent me on 15 December—that, as he said in his letter, he is "sympathetic to the problem" of candidates being attacked, using the internet, to undermine their personal reputation by the telling of lies.

The problem of character assassination in general election campaigns has always been dealt with by the Representation of the People Acts, but, in this case, that

remedy failed because the material had been posted on to the internet prior to the election campaign. It had not been removed from the internet during the general election campaign. That was deemed inadequate to constitute publication for the purposes of the existing Acts.

At that time, I thought that it would be more appropriate to move an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill. Subsequently, however, I have been advised that it would be more appropriate to move an amendment to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. I should be very grateful if, in his reply to the debate, the Under-Secretary—whom I thank for the close interest that he has taken in the matter—might give an intimation of whether he would welcome such an amendment in Committee. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), who intervened on me on that previous occasion, has said that he is willing to table an amendment with me. On that note of consensus, I conclude my remarks.

9.30 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): The Opposition have always made it clear that we support the recommendations of the Neill committee and that we shall support the legislation that implements the report. Politics in Britain is clearly not corrupt. We already have legislation to deal with corrupt and illegal practices. However, many legal practices that have grown up in recent years have led to concerns in the minds of our electors about the transparency of our democracy.

Concerns about money lead to suspicions about the motives of elected politicians, the army of voluntary workers who support them and the generous contributions made by donors large and small. Neill stated clearly that he

"was not offered any direct evidence of misconduct by political parties or by their fundraisers."

He went on:

"The pursuit of politics is an honourable profession to which many men and women devote their lives. Behind each career politician stands a regiment of dedicated party workers."

We owe it to our electors, to those voluntary workers and to our donors to use the Bill to create transparent and open financial arrangements for our political organisations that will enhance our democracy, putting those who give so generously beyond reproach, protecting our fundraisers and treasurers, most of whom give of their free time, and leaving us elected politicians to get on with government or legitimately opposing those who govern.

I am grateful to my right hon. and hon. Friends for their contributions to today's debate. I particularly wish to echo the excellent opening speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). We look to the Minister to answer the questions that he posed. The first and key question related to timing. The provisions of the Bill affect events up to one year before a general election. Can we assume that an election held in October of this year, as was suggested in *The Times* this morning, or the spring of next year would be excluded? The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) mentioned the by-election that Plaid Cymru has called with undue haste in Ceredigion. It will not be covered by the Bill, because it will take place as soon as 3 February.

The Government are committed to holding a referendum on proportional representation in this Parliament. Will it be held under the new rules? Will policy development grants be paid before the next general election? Do the Government regard the spending of trade union political funds as separate from the funding of the Labour party? Will we get better definitions of donation and sponsorship? Why does the Labour party, which backed the 20-year limit for overseas voters in 1989, want to halve it to 10 years? Why did the Government reject Neill's recommendations on tax relief for small political donations? I shall deal in a moment with my right hon. Friend's comments on referendums.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) gave an excellent speech. He is a distinguished member of the Neill committee and made some useful comments on third party expenditure and the de minimis limits. His comments on the obligations placed on local party treasurers and on donors tracking their own donations are most helpful and we shall use them in Committee. His comments on tax relief for small donations will also be pursued in Committee. I hope that the Minister will justify his opposition on the grounds of cost, either tonight or in Committee. My right hon. Friend's comments were echoed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who gave a fascinating historical perspective to the Bill and made a series of useful observations which we shall also use in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan)—who was most restrained in following the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley)—raised some useful points on the powers of the Electoral Commission, on referendums and on the unfairness of the Government's proposals on referendums. Latterly, my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) gave an excellent speech, touching on standards in political life. He raised concerns that we all share about the funding of referendums, and I wish to speak a little about that now.

I wish to deal with that aspect of fairness in our democracy—the equality of opportunity for both sides to be able to put their case in an argument. On this test, the Bill clearly fails when it comes to referendums. Neill's recommendation 83 was:

"In any referendum campaign there must be a fair opportunity for each side of the argument to be properly put to the voters."

Neill rightly proposes vigorous standards of financial transparency in the funding of the referendum campaigns, along with some excellent proposals—which are incorporated in the Bill—on core funding from the public purse.

Neill did not propose the elaborate dog's dinner contained in the Bill for limiting the funding of various types of organisations based on some quite bogus criteria. Neill states:

"It would be impracticable to try to control campaign spending. The number of individuals and organisations involved would often be too large. The time scale would often be too short. Adequate accounting procedures would often be impossible to put in place. The administrative apparatus required would resemble one of Heath Robinson's most outlandish contraptions—and would almost certainly not work."

Well, Heath Robinson is alive and well and working in the Home Office. He helped draft this Bill.

[Mr. Robert Walter]

It might be useful for a moment to analyse why referendums are used or proposed in this country. The 1975 referendum enabled Harold Wilson to bypass a deeply divided Labour party and gain a popular mandate for his policy as opposed to that of the national executive committee of the Labour party. The 1979 devolution referendum saw leading members of both major parties in both the yes and no camps. Indeed, the future leader of the Labour party, Mr. Neil Kinnock, campaigned vigorously and successfully against his own Government's proposition. I had the delight, two months later, of being his Conservative opponent in the subsequent general election.

Mr. Winnick: What was the result?

Mr. Walter: Unfortunately, he won—but only just.

The most recent devolution referendums—particularly the one in Wales—saw prominent members of the governing party campaigning against the proposition. Both the major parties at the last election were committed to a referendum on the single currency, which has been mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides. Why? Why, in a representative democracy, did they not have a clear mandate on the issue? Why are the Government proposing a referendum on proportional representation? With 75 per cent. of the Labour party against the proposition, there is no clear mandate for it.

What is the logic of controlling the expenditure in a referendum campaign by linking it to political parties and then defining a formula based on popular support at a general election at which the Government gained no clear mandate on the issue that is the subject of the referendum? Who will decide whether the Labour party's £5 million in the PR referendum is given to the no or to the yes campaign? Will it be the Prime Minister or the national executive committee?

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): Same thing.

Mr. Walter: Oh, it is the same thing, is it? The truth is revealed.

Mr. Straw: It was a joke.

Mr. Walter: He who laughs last.

If there is no coherent link between support in a general election and party commitment to a referendum outcome, how should we control the spending—or should we control it at all? Neill rejected any cap because of the complexity of enforcement. As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) pointed out, whatever the cap, the proprietors of *The Sun* or *The Mirror* can campaign for one side or the other day after day and not be subject to any limit.

There is a certain attraction in the simplicity of an equal cap on both sides, but Neill could find no formula that would fit the Bill. The Government's formula is unfair and unsustainable. The Home Secretary is clearly unhappy and has invited an alternative proposal. The proposal on the table is the Neill proposal, which we support.

The Bill contains important constitutional changes. I emphasise our desire that, by agreement through the usual channels, the provisions on referendums, on the control of political parties, on the establishment of the Electoral Commission and on restricting the franchise should be taken on the Floor of the House.

We welcome the Neill report and support the measures to enact it, so we will not divide the House tonight.

9.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): Some commentators are naturally suspicious whenever the House agrees on legislation, but I take considerable comfort in the large measure of cross-party support for many of the Bill's provisions. Despite the tone of the end of the speech by the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), the House has been broadly supportive of the terms of the Bill.

We have heard some excellent speeches, including those from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and my hon. Friends the Members for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead). My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) made a well-informed and thoughtful speech, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) made a powerful contribution.

There were also important and worthwhile contributions from the right hon. Members for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) and for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke). I listened with especial care to the contribution of the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), who is a member of the Neill committee. The endorsement of a leading Tory on the committee for most of the Bill's provisions was telling. I hope to deal with his specific questions as we proceed.

When we are embarking on major constitutional changes and changing some of our party political machinery, it is right that the House should proceed on a consensual basis as far as is possible. Nothing would be more destabilising than if, with each new Administration, how we conduct our elections were subject to change and counter-change.

There is still no agreement on a number of issues—thankfully, a small number. I hope that we can discuss those issues as the Bill progresses through the House. On referendum spending limits, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has on more than one occasion said that he is willing to consider alternative proposals; but any alternative must be workable. We see fundamental practical and legal difficulties with any scheme that applies a single overall spending limit to each side of the argument in a referendum. The right hon. Member for South Norfolk made a telling point when he said that he thought that it was probably impossible to have complete equality. Those who seek to achieve it must have the onus placed on them to show that it would be practical and legal to achieve that aim. We do not have a closed mind on the issue, but we have considered it with care and the other solutions that have been proposed would produce even greater difficulties.

The hon. Member for North Dorset made the point that the Neill committee recommended that fair opportunity should be provided for both sides to put their arguments

to the public during a referendum, and we endorse that view. However, fairness does not necessarily mean equality. Equality may produce unfairness in certain types of campaign, especially if those on the same side have different reasons for seeking a particular outcome. Some people might not be able to advance their views under an umbrella organisation which would, I suspect, be the only way in which we could achieve perfect equality in expenditure.

The hon. Member for North Dorset also said that the Opposition had said that they would support the Neill proposals. However, I note that, in the Conservatives' internal briefing on the Neill committee's inquiry, they said:

"In some areas, we think that the Neill report does not go far enough. If there are election spending limits, for example, there is a strong case for capping spending on referendum campaigns too."

The proposed 28-day purdah period provided for in clause 118 is entirely consistent with the Neill committee's recommendations and with the long-standing position in respect of general election campaigns with which the committee drew a parallel. The Neill committee has welcomed the Government's proposals in relation to the role played by the Government during a referendum campaign. Separate legislation would be needed, for example, to determine the procedure for setting the question that would be put in a referendum. The question will need to be considered in the context of such legislation, and it is right that its wording should be a matter for Parliament to decide. The Neill committee did not propose any role for the Electoral Commission in setting a referendum question, but the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross suggested that it should. We are sympathetic to that idea, and will consider it.

We listened carefully to the comments about the expenditure limits proposed in the Bill. In particular, the Neill committee has said that it does not oppose expenditure limits as a matter of principle, but it has questioned whether parties represented in the House of Commons should be subject to the same £5 million limit, irrespective of the number of Members of Parliament they had. In view of the Neill committee's concern, we have adjusted the expenditure limits for political parties so that they are now geared according to the parties' share of the vote at the last election. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan), among others, questioned whether that was fair, but achieving complete fairness would be difficult. It is a legitimate area for debate and perhaps in Committee we may consider it in more detail. I repeat that we do not have a closed mind on the issue.

We will propose Government amendments in relation to the administration of referendums. As the Bill stands, part VIII provides the framework for the fair conduct of referendums, but the nuts and bolts of organising the poll and the count are missing. We intend to table amendments that will plug that gap and make the legislation a truly generic referendums Bill. I do not expect those amendments to be controversial, so the House need not worry, but we will welcome any representations the Opposition may have to make.

Another point raised by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire and by the hon. Members for North Dorset and for Blaby was which stages of the Bill might be taken on the Floor of the House. As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said earlier, we recognise that parts of the Bill give rise to constitutional issues. However, that cannot be said of the Bill as a whole. We will wish to discuss through the usual channels which provisions should properly be taken on the Floor of the House. I hope that that explanation provides some reassurance.

The right hon. Members for North-West Hampshire, for South Norfolk and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross all mentioned tax relief. The right hon. Member for South Norfolk also asked about administration costs. The Government are not persuaded of the case for tax relief on donations. It would amount to general state aid by another route, and the Government have to balance the loss of revenue that such relief would entail against other spending priorities.

The Bill sets out proposals for targeted assistance to political parties, including provision for a total of up to £2 million to be made available each year for a policy development grant. A generous increase, 270 per cent., in the Short money funding for Opposition parties has been agreed.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the administration costs of tax relief. Such costs are only one factor—by no means the paramount one—that the Government took into account when coming to their view. We are still prepared to discuss the issue during the Bill's passage. Any precise assessment of the administrative costs of a tax relief scheme will depend on the ultimate shape of the relief and the way in which it is paid. No decision on these matters has been taken. Subject to that proviso, I suppose that a very rough estimate—I can do no better than that—of the sort of costs to the Inland Revenue of setting up and administering such a scheme would be between £700,000 and £1.1 million in the first year, and between £500,000 and £700,000 in subsequent years. Such costs are high, and must be set against the likely benefit to the main political parties—which will themselves incur costs in connection with the administration of the scheme—of perhaps £4 million or £5 million. There has to be a balance. We can discuss these issues further, but I hope that that explanation is helpful to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The arguments that the Minister deploys about the costs of that scheme are perfectly valid, but how does he address the more telling political question? Unless we encourage people who will give smaller amounts of money, we will allow the drift of political funding to go in favour of a few well-off people who will contribute—that is, funding by the few, not the many.

Mr. O'Brien: I do not wish to teach the hon. Gentleman how to run a political party, but the Labour party has done precisely that. It has changed the whole way in which it is funded by talking to its members and supporters and bringing in, in small donations, very large sums of money. We have changed the basis of much of the Labour party's funding.

The hon. Gentleman should look at the operation that the Labour party has undertaken and the way in which we go out and talk to our members—indeed, the Conservative party says that it has been doing something similar for a long time. In that way, he may find out how to do this. The main thing though, is for the hon. Gentleman's party to have the members first.

[Mr. O'Brien]

I should like to deal with a couple of other questions raised and will write to hon. Members on the points that I do not have the opportunity to deal with here. The right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire spoke about the exclusion of trade unions from the ambit of the Labour party. The trade unions are regarded by the public more as donors to the Labour party. If the unions are treated as an integral part of the Labour party, their affiliation fees will be an internal party transaction, not subject to disclosure. Clause 22(8) ensures that such affiliation fees are treated as donations and are subject to the disclosure requirements. The Labour party prefers such matters to be open. I hope that that deals with the point.

I was asked about whether charitable stalls and company stalls at party conferences require shareholder consent. I am happy to discuss further—both through the usual channels and directly with hon. Members from the various parties—how the matter of conferences should be dealt with. A genuine problem exists that requires further consideration. Some of the issues are complex, especially those involving stands at conferences, and we shall be happy to discuss them further.

Another question had to do with when policy development grants will be available. We expect them to be available after 1 April 2001, but it remains to be seen whether that will be before or after the next general election.

I should like to tackle a number of other matters, but fear that time will defeat me. However, I can tell the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) that I am still considering the matter that he posed in connection with the internet. I have some sympathy with his point, although I cannot guarantee that we will be able to deal with it during consideration of this Bill. However, I am prepared to discuss the matter further with the hon. Gentleman.

My hon. Friend the hon. Member for Rotherham made a powerful speech, one important element of which was that the role of a party's national treasurer will become very sensitive and be subject to very strict rules. All political parties must grasp the importance of this change, and take it on board. To paraphrase a former Prime Minister, I can tell the House that the time for penny-farthing political parties has gone: we now need some professionalism in the organisation of the finances of all parties, both small and large.

The public will demand that, because they want openness. The Bill will deliver the necessary level of openness, but the political parties will be required to ensure that there is an element of professionalism in their financial organisation.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) raised a number of important points. As other contributors noted, the hon. Gentleman's presence in the House is a clear sign of the need for a Bill such as this. I listened with interest to what he said and I welcome his general support for the Bill. With regard to the cap of £19.7 million on election expenditure, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government considered the level of that cap with great care. However, we must be realistic and accept that parties have to be able to communicate with the electorate on a national basis.

We want to ensure that the level of funding is realistic. If we went down to the level of £2 million suggested by the hon. Gentleman, the incentive for getting around the requirement might become considerable. We must be realistic about the nature of our political process, and establish rules that we can enforce.

However, I agree with the hon. Member for Tatton that, in recent years, the question of sleaze has brought discredit on our political system. Too many people in the country think that politicians are a bunch of self-interested crooks. As my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mr. Bradley) said, each scandal discredits more than just the individual or political party involved. In the eyes of many of our constituents, such scandals reflect badly on all political parties and all politicians. That is one of the reasons why young people are often alienated from the political process. It is why some refuse to vote, and it is also why even those who do vote have a cynicism about the political process rather than a proper scepticism about politicians.

As the Neill report showed, many hon. Members on both sides of the House became involved in politics out of a sense of idealism and a determination to improve things. For the average voter, it is difficult to associate idealism and trust with foreign donations, secrecy in party funding and the behaviour of some politicians.

As the hon. Member for Tatton suggested, it is time to reassert the better values of decent politics and to give honest politicians the ability to present politics as an honourable vocation. We must give political parties a chance to show that they care more about principles than donations. The Bill gives us that chance, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

POLITICAL PARTIES, ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) expenditure incurred by the Electoral Commission by virtue of the Act;

(b) expenses incurred by the Secretary of State in consequence of the Act; and

(c) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which under any other Act are payable out of money so provided;

(2) the payment out of the Consolidated Fund of—

(a) salaries, allowances and other benefits payable to or in respect of holders (or former holders) of the office of Electoral Commissioner; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which under any other Act are payable out of that Fund;

(3) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Care Workers

10 pm

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I wish to present a petition on behalf of Mrs. Irene Stack and Mr. Simon Dolby and other members of my constituency.

The petition declares:

The current levels of protections for the elderly from untrained or unsuitable care workers are inadequate. The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to introduce:

1) A national register for professional carers to protect the elderly.

2) A minimum time ban for nurses struck off the register held by the UK Central Council for Nurses and Midwives.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

The petition was signed by 2,000 people in my constituency.

To lie upon the Table.

Renewable Energy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

10.1 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Renewable energy is where the knowledge-based economy meets the environment. It is where market-based solutions deliver reductions in carbon dioxide emissions and it provides opportunities to modernise and enhance our industrial and manufacturing competitiveness by developing new technologies and expertise.

The dome, which was the centrepiece of our successful millennium eve celebrations, is powered by renewable energy. Similarly, the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency in Washington and Gatwick airport's north terminal both use renewable energy. British Petroleum, Shell, PowerGen, National Power, Eastern Electricity, Yorkshire Water, Rolls-Royce, Pilkington and Harland and Wolff are just some of our national and international companies with interests in the renewable energy industry. It employs about 3,500 people in more than 700 companies in this country.

Achieving our target of 10 per cent. of electricity from renewables by 2010 would create between 10,000 to 45,000 new jobs, according to the Department of Trade and Industry, and up to double that number according to estimates from Friends of the Earth. Many of those new jobs would be in manufacturing and/or rural areas. According to estimates by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, achieving that 10 per cent. target would also provide 25 per cent. of the carbon savings needed to meet the 20 per cent. carbon dioxide emission reduction in our manifesto commitment.

In short, the renewables industry offers significant environmental, economic and social benefits, at a time when energy markets worldwide are in transition. For example, in the past 20 years, the coal and oil share of generating capacity in the United Kingdom has halved. Fossil fuels are certainly not yet running out—gas fuels 28 per cent. of the electricity market in this country and considerable coal reserves are left—but the global sourcing of such energy is changing, potentially increasing costs and certainly raising issues about security and diversity of supply. Few challenge the view that rising fossil fuel demand cannot be sustained indefinitely.

In addition, open competition in energy markets, together with new technologies, are making on-site, smaller scale generation efficient and viable. That is changing and challenging a traditional exclusive vision of electricity production as being just about large, remote power stations serving an extensive distribution grid. The other crucial dynamic is our international obligation for reductions in greenhouse gases emissions. That is particularly important as more than two thirds of the United Kingdom's carbon dioxide emissions come from non-transport energy production.

Our renewables industry is ideally poised to offer solutions and responses for those changing energy needs. Indeed, the Department of Trade and Industry's renewable consultation document identified renewables as offering an option for maintaining a degree of diversity in the electricity system in the longer term. It said that they were the most promising option for the development of a

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

sustainable non-fossil fuel generation system and an increasingly cost-effective means of reducing CO_2 emissions. Couple that with the new employment and export opportunities that renewables offer and it is no surprise that the industry's potential has been highlighted by the DTI's own foresight programme.

As Lord Sainsbury of Turville made clear on 5 November last year, to achieve our immediate target of 10 per cent. of electricity from renewables by 2010,

"a very significant increase in the rate of investment in renewables will be necessary".

The European Communities Committee in the other place made clear in a report published in June its view that the UK needed to increase the average annual rate of installing renewable electricity generation by a factor of at least seven. I recognise the excellent work in this area already initiated by those on our Front Bench—for example, the reversal of the decline in research funding planned by the Conservatives, the allocation of £43.5 million for investment in renewables over the next three years, the record 260 projects contracted for under the fifth NFFO—non-fossil fuel obligation—order placed in September 1998, and the climate change levy, with renewables exempt, which inevitably encourages business to consider carefully the source of its energy.

Our Government have not been idle. The outlook for the industry now, compared to the position just three years ago, is considerably more positive. Nevertheless, such was the lack of imagination bedevilling industrial policy under the Conservatives that our renewables industry, despite its considerable potential, has not had the long-term development support available to some of our competitor countries.

By comparison, on 12 August last year, Bill Clinton signed an executive order aimed at trebling American use of biomass energy, and setting up a permanent council to manage a programme that included a package of tax credits as well as significant levels of direct Government funding. The US Government already have a programme to achieve a million solar roofs. The German Government want to achieve 100,000 solar roofs, and the Japanese Government want 70,000 solar roofs—programmes of support designed to create strong domestic markets from which to achieve the economies of scale necessary to perform well in the rapidly growing global solar market.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. What does he make of the claim by the British photovoltaic industry that an expansion of internal production and the creation of an internal market would make PV viable in the UK? That is the main obstacle standing between PV and viability, compared with other forms of energy, in the UK.

Mr. Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. There is much to be said for the argument advanced by the British Photovoltaic Association. That is the assumption on which the US, German and Japanese Governments are aiming for significant expansion in the number of solar roofs.

We have arguably the best offshore and onshore wind resource in Europe yet, at 330 MW of installed and operational wind capacity, we lag behind Germany, where 2,900 MW of installed capacity already exist, and Denmark, where 1,450 MW of installed capacity are in place. Denmark is already meeting 10 per cent. of its electricity needs from wind power alone, has a substantial domestic manufacturing base as a result, and is aiming for 20 per cent. of electricity from renewables by 2003 and 35 per cent. by 2030.

Estimates from World Energy Council projections indicate cumulative investment in renewables ranging from £150 billion to £400 billion over the next 10 years, while analysis by Shell suggests renewables meeting about 40 per cent. of world energy needs by 2050. By any definition, that represents a huge business opportunity.

Other action to help our renewables industry to make up for the failures of the Tory years could include new national targets for renewables beyond 2010. Targets help to concentrate minds, define ambitions and create confidence about long-term policy support. They would help to focus minds in the industry, the financial community and the many relevant parts of Whitehall.

Early announcement of regional targets for renewables generation would also help to lock in other crucial agencies—for example, the regional development agencies, the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies and the Scottish Parliament—to achieve our renewables goals.

Coal, gas, oil and nuclear all have their champions in Westminster and Whitehall, and a sustainable energy agency is, rightly, strongly supported by the renewables industry to perform a similar role. Such bodies exist successfully in New South Wales and the Netherlands, co-ordinating funding, research and business advice to their renewables industry.

Such a body need not be created from scratch—the Green Alliance proposed developing an enhanced role for the Energy Savings Trust to help complement existing work in Whitehall and by individual renewables trade associations, thus avoiding the cost and disruption of organisational change.

The failure of many renewables projects during the planning process has been a particular problem for some parts of the industry, with suitable and sensitive schemes delayed and prevented by the planning system from coming to fruition.

I welcome the positive consideration of that issue in the Department of Trade and Industry's consultation document last year and in the response to the report by the Select Committee in the other place on the European Union report on renewables. I hope that my right hon. Friend will be able to expand on those comments and outline what other action is being taken to help to tackle that problem.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I apologise for missing the start of my hon. Friend's compelling speech. Does he agree that energy policy requires joined-up government action, not only in planning but in agriculture and the whole of industry?

Mr. Thomas: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We are beginning to see such action, and I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will outline further such measures in her speech.

The new electricity trading arrangements and the utilities Bill are set to modernise our domestic energy market. The obligation on suppliers to achieve a

percentage of renewable energy, which is expected to be in the utilities Bill, will be extremely welcome. I hope, too, that the regulator, as part of its enhanced role, will be able to promote and encourage renewables generation.

There is concern within the industry about the possible impact of the new trading arrangements. In particular, generators with NFFO contracts want reassurance about their position under the new arrangements. The other key concern is that intermittent or fluctuating sources of generation, including many renewables, which are unable to predict four hours in advance, will be much less attractive to suppliers. I recognise that progress has been made on that issue, and I trust that my right hon. Friend can confirm that appropriate aggregation arrangements, for example, will be allowable.

I urge my right hon. Friend also to consider the case for a dedicated member representing renewables to be on the balancing and settlement panel—the body central to the on-going governance of the new electricity trading arrangements. I hope that the way in which renewables are affected by the new arrangements will be kept under careful review. I hope also that my right hon. Friend will be able to confirm the Department's positive view of embedded generation and outline what further steps it is taking to encourage the benefits of embedded generation to be properly valued and accounted for.

I hope that my right hon. Friend will consider introducing a positive programme to encourage net metering to help facilitate smaller-scale renewable energy generation for individual domestic and business usage. Net metering would enable small generators to export any excess electricity back to the grid at a fair price. Various forms of net metering are already in place in Germany and Holland. Net metering is also very much alive in America, where 22 states, including Wisconsin, Idaho, California and Washington, have varying net metering regimes. A further seven states are in the process of introducing such schemes.

Net metering could be an attractive option for social housing providers, offering pathways out of fuel poverty for their tenants. Imagine the pleasure of watching our electricity costs reduce before our eyes as our meter turns backwards, reflecting our excess electricity going to the grid. If that can be done in America, Germany and in Holland, it begs the obvious question, "Why not here too?" I hope that my right hon. Friend will strongly encourage further action at a European level to encourage renewables and the maximising of funding from EU sources for British renewables developers.

In its report on the EU report on renewables, the Select Committee in the other place said that the proportion of renewable energy used in the European Union has increased by just 1 per cent. since 1990 and that a threefold increase is required to meet the European Union's target of getting 12 per cent. of energy from renewables.

The development of energy crops in particular is hindered by the high cost of their establishment, which inevitably makes them an unattractive proposition compared with more traditional farming activities, which receive support under the common agricultural policy. I recognise that some progress was made during the Agenda 2000 discussions, but I hope that my right hon. Friend will continue to push for further appropriate reforms to ensure that what is potentially an exciting new business opportunity for rural communities receives much-needed EU funding.

In 1997, the EU "White Paper for a Community Strategy and Action Plan for Renewables", published on the eve of the Kyoto conference, said:

"In some cases it will be appropriate . . . for . . . Member States' authorities to enact necessary legislation . . . in areas such as flexible depreciation of renewable energy investments; favourable tax treatment for third party financing of renewable energy; start up subsidies for new production plant, small and medium enterprises and new job creation, and financial incentives for consumers to purchase renewable energy equipment and services."

I hope that, in the light of that comment and other imperatives, my right hon. Friend will continue to keep under close consideration, particularly during her discussions with the Treasury, the levels and form of financial support for renewables. I should like to highlight the tax exemptions given in Denmark to those investing in green funds, which have provided considerable funding for the development of locally owned wind farms. In its report on the EU report on renewables, the Lords Select Committee on the European Union made a similar recommendation.

The renewables industry will experience considerable growth in the first years of the new millennium, as energy markets change, new opportunities for manufacturing and jobs are exploited and the ever more important environmental imperative to reduce carbon dioxide emissions is focused on. The global market for wind and solar energy is set to double in the next three years—a rate of growth comparable to sales of mobile phones and internet services. In short, the British renewables industry is ideally placed to benefit from, and to lead, such growth.

10.15 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) on securing this Adjournment debate. It is appropriate that the first such debate of the new century is on the future of our energy supply and its development in a way that is sustainable and that meets the needs both of our economy and of the planet. I am delighted that he has returned from his recent exertions none the worse for wear and that, while on the piste, he has crafted some excellent phrases. I warn him that I shall probably pinch a few of them, not least his description of renewables as

"where the knowledge-based economy meets the environment."

I hope that he has not claimed copyright on that singularly apt phrase.

I like my hon. Friend's concentration on the job-creation potential of renewable energy generation—an industrial sector with tremendous scope for expansion. In discussions with representatives of the energy industry, I am always conscious of the increasing extent to which some of the largest players are involved in generation from renewable sources. However, there is a long way to go and much to do, and today's debate gives me an opportunity to restate the Government's commitment to the promotion and development of renewable energy.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the increased use of renewable energy will contribute to the security and diversity of energy supply, while helping us to move towards a more sustainable form of energy development.

[Mrs. Helen Liddell]

The opportunities that that effort offers are considerable. The Government expect renewable energy, improved energy efficiency and increased use of combined heat and power to play an important role in reducing future greenhouse gas emissions. The development and increased use of renewable energy is an important part of any cost-effective climate change strategy, not only in the coming decade but far beyond. It is inevitable that we shall face further constraints on greenhouse gas emissions and our ability to burn fossil fuels.

The Government have already implemented a raft of measures to stimulate the uptake of renewable energy and to assist the development of the UK industry. In September 1998, we announced the fifth and largest ever order for England and Wales under the non-fossil fuel obligation, comprising some 260 projects and almost 1,200 MW of capacity. In February last year, we announced the third Scottish renewables order for a further 53 projects and 150 MW capacity. In March, we announced a steep increase in spending on research and development, with the budget set to total £43.5 million over three years. At the same time, we announced plans to re-establish the wave programme closed by the previous Government—we shall shortly announce the first projects under that new programme.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, we have already announced our intention of working towards a 10 per cent. renewable contribution to UK electricity supplies. We published a consultation paper on that and, in July, we published the responses to it. The target is challenging, but it is only the first move towards a much wider use of renewable energy

My hon. Friend referred to the planning issues that surround renewables. Last summer, we launched a new regional planning initiative. In November, we issued two consultation papers on network management and licensing issues for embedded generation, which my hon. Friend mentioned. That is directly relevant to renewables. Only last month, we announced our intention of allocating around £30 million to the growing of energy crops over the six years to March 2007. My hon. Friend and the House know that we have also announced plans to exempt all forms of renewable energy, including electricity generated from renewable sources, from the climate change levy that will be introduced in April 2001. That provides a substantial financial incentive to the industry.

It is important to examine renewable energy in the overall context of our broader environmental strategy and our economic policies. We will publish draft proposals for the UK climate change programme shortly.

We also propose to publish the utilities Bill shortly. It will provide new powers to support renewable energy development. I will make a further statement on future support for renewables at that time. I am sure that the House appreciates that it is not appropriate for me to go into detail about the contents of the Bill at this stage.

As part of our overall analysis of our future energy needs, we take into account the difficulties of ensuring that we meet our 10 per cent. target of generating electricity from renewables. We also want to be absolutely sure that electricity supply companies have completely bought into that process. We want contracts to be commercially viable. That will continue with the provisions that we shall put in place for new electricity trading arrangements.

In moving towards the target of 10 per cent., we will have to increase our renewable energy generating capacity by perhaps as much as 4,000 MW above what we are likely to reach by 2003. That will mean significant contributions from many technologies, such as waste, landfill gas and onshore wind. They have provided the mainstay of the non-fossil fuel obligation policy to date. However, we must consider the less developed technologies such as offshore wind and the energy crops to which my hon. Friend referred in his interesting speech. It is vital that we consider increased research and development and that we also consider planning targets.

My hon. Friend and I face a significant challenge. Those of us who are committed to renewable energy have to be confident that we can take people with us. Many people are worried about the technology that surrounds electricity generation in particular. They are used to large electricity generating plants, but much of the renewable generation will be on a smaller scale and closer to communities. Therefore, we have to persuade people. That aim underpins our attitude to planning.

My hon. Friend mentioned photovoltaics. We acknowledge that that there is an important debate about photovoltaics. We believe that solar PV can make a significant contribution to renewable energy supplies both in the UK and elsewhere in the longer term. It offers a cost-effective electricity supply in many applications when grid connection is too expensive or unavailable, and it makes an important contribution to energy, environmental and social goals in developing countries.

However, PV is currently an expensive means of generation. Critics argue that the Government could create a market by subsidising installations and that that would lead to economies of scale and a self-sustaining market. I do not think that that would work because the costs are too high and the UK market is too small. I am not yet persuaded that the cost could be justified by the social and environmental benefits—this is an emerging technology. A 50,000-roof programme with a 50 per cent. subsidy, as has been suggested by Greenpeace and others, would cost the taxpayer about £250 million. That is not to say that we do not support photovoltaics—we do—but we need to ensure that we move towards a more cost-effective programme as well.

There is another matter on which I have to take a different view from my hon. Friend. He has previously argued very eloquently in the House for the formation of a new sustainable energy agency. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) referred to joined-up government, but I do not believe that establishing such an agency is the way to secure it. The Government would have to remain responsible for policy; Departments and Ministers across Government would have to work together to develop policy and monitor its implementation; and the burden of liaison and co-ordination would increase rather than decrease.

I also believe that we would be taking a retrograde step if we were to set up a separate agency to deal with sustainable development because we would be removing it from the mainstream of Government policy, which is where it should be if we are to have a truly sustainable energy policy. If we are to have sustainable development,

we have to cut across all areas that relate to energy efficiency, from housing to energy policy, health and taxation. I am unpersuaded of the case for a sustainable energy agency, but not because I want in some way to weaken the Government's commitment to sustainable energy. I argue against such an agency for precisely the opposite reason, although I understand the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West.

My hon. Friend also referred to the changes that will take place in the electricity market. The planned reforms, including the introduction of further competition in electricity supply, have encouraged key players in the industry to suggest options that allow people to choose green electricity. That will make sustainable, environmentally friendly electricity available in a commercial setting, which is the way to guarantee its future; and linking it with exemption from the climate change levy will provide a market-based financial incentive for the industry to participate in such schemes. The reforms will make the current NFFO mechanisms inappropriate, which is why we shall shortly introduce new powers to support renewables through the utilities Bill.

The new trading arrangements that we shall introduce will mean the operation for the first time of—to use that dreadful phrase—a level playing field for all electricity generators, which will allow real opportunities for them. The regulator, too, has shown commitment to developing, for example, embedded generation. He has proposed a new group, under his chairmanship, that will examine a wide range of matters, including the principles and the ground rules for the connection and use of system charges to facilitate and encourage embedded generation.

My hon. Friend referred to net metering. Although the Government want to ensure that small renewable energy generators such as those involved in photovoltaics get the full value of their generation, it is not immediately obvious to us that net metering would achieve that. We want to use the system of distribution licences as a means of facilitating competition. That duty will in itself embrace the need for embedded generation—including operators of both renewable and combined heat and power plants—to allow them access to distribution systems on fair terms.

My hon. Friend also referred to the European dimension. European policy is very important, and discussions in the other place have shown it to be significant. There is still much to be done on European policy, not least a draft directive on fair access to renewables, which will be introduced shortly.

This is an important subject that will have a growing impact on how we generate energy in the 21st century. I again congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and I look forward to many more opportunities of discussing with him and colleagues the future of renewable energy generation.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 11 January 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That Madam Speaker do issue her Warrant for the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County Constituency of Ceredigion in the room of Cynog Glyndwr Dafis, Esquire, who since his election for the said County Constituency has accepted the Office of Steward or Bailiff of Her Majesty's Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—*[Mr. Llwyd.]*

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (*By Order*)

Order for consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Tuesday 18 January.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Buses (Yorkshire and Humberside)

1. **Ms Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster, Central): What steps he is taking to improve the quality of bus services in Yorkshire and Humberside area. [103251]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The Yorkshire and Humberside area will benefit from the measures in the Transport Bill. The Bill provides for a statutory form of bus quality partnership schemes and quality contracts in certain circumstances. That is in the interests of promoting high-quality public transport and a better environment.

Ms Winterton: I welcome the Bill, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware that people in rural areas can feel physically isolated and socially excluded without access to good-quality bus services. The 1,800 new rural services have provided a lifeline to many of those people, but how many of those services are in the Yorkshire and Humberside area? What further action might be taken to improve rural bus services?

Mr. Prescott: The rural bus scheme is highly successful. Of the 1,800 services, about 134 are in the Yorkshire and Humberside area. Some authorities have not done so well, though. North Yorkshire, for example, has spent only about 25 per cent. of the money that was available, but I am pleased to announce 50 new projects in the rural bus challenge fund scheme, five of which will be in Yorkshire and Humberside. Many more people will have the choice of public transport in rural areas.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Government raise more from the fuel duty on community bus services than they pay every year in lottery grants. Will he therefore improve bus services in Humberside, Yorkshire and elsewhere by offering a fuel duty rebate to community bus services as well?

Mr. Prescott: We will take no lectures from Opposition Members on fuel duty. We are providing a rural bus service that is welcomed in rural areas, despite Opposition Members' protests. This morning, I received a letter from a pensioner in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley). It says:

"I am writing to tell you the Government's rural bus service initiative has produced two new bus services in my area. Not only that, they actually connect with the trains."

It is called integration. A better public transport system is being provided by the Government.

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when, next year, as a result of legislation that is going through the House, pensioners in Selby, Yorkshire become entitled for the first time to half-fare bus passes, it would be advantageous if a reciprocal agreement could be reached between West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority, the Selby district and all the other districts in Yorkshire, so that pensioners could use their half-fare bus passes throughout the county—as they can already be used between West Yorkshire and Greater Manchester?

Mr. Prescott: We seek to achieve that. Indeed, the legislation that is before the House will achieve it: a statutory minimum half-fare system for pensioners. Two million pensioners will benefit. It is another example of a good transport system.

Central Railway

2. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): If he will make a statement on the latest proposals from Central Railway plc. [103252]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I am aware that Central Railway plc has been consulting about its proposal for a freight and passenger railway between Liverpool and Lille. I have received copies of the company's consultation documents, but have not taken a view on the scheme.

Mr. Robathan: I well recall that, before he was elevated to his current position, the Minister was concerned about the Central Railway scheme and its effect on his constituency. My constituents remain deeply concerned about several routes that are blighting houses not only in Leicestershire but throughout the rest of the

country, from Kent all the way to Liverpool. Will he state categorically whether any public money will be devoted to that grandiose scheme, which, although superficially attractive, seems unviable to most people? Are the Government minded to give it their support, which will be critical in bringing the scheme to the House? The company wishes to have parliamentary approval by the end of the year.

Mr. Hill: I recognise the concerns that the hon. Gentleman expresses on behalf of his constituents. He is right to observe that I have a certain hinterland on the issue. I understand that the company intends to submit a new application for an order before the summer, after which it will be obliged to consult on any applications and affected parties will have the right to put forward their views. No public money will be entailed in the scheme. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate, however, that the Secretary of State will have a quasi-judicial role in considering the application.

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I welcome my hon. Friend's reply—he will know of my interest in and support for the scheme. Does he agree that such a scheme could fit in very well with the Government's transport policy, by transferring large amounts of road freight to rail; that it would save public money by reducing roads expenditure; and that it could contribute significantly to the financial viability of the channel tunnel?

Mr. Hill: I am certainly aware of the outspoken support that my hon. Friend has offered to the scheme, and recognise the passenger and freight implications of the proposal. I should, however, remind him that the Government are already taking effective action to secure the transfer of freight from road to rail.

In conjunction with the British Railways Board, the shadow Strategic Rail Authority has recently announced a competition for a model project for transferring freight from road to rail. Moreover, the new Strategic Rail Authority, to be set up by the Transport Bill, will—unlike Opraf—have a new and specific duty to develop a rail freight strategy. Finally, Government grants for rail freight facilities are at record levels. Expenditure on grants, in the three years since 1997, will soon top £80 million. It is also estimated that, in that time, grants will have diverted close to 30 million tonnes of freight from Britain's roads.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): If the Minister is not to support large projects for transferring freight from road to rail, as the Central project would do, which projects will he support? Does he agree that that project is one of many to increase capacity on the rail network but demanding billions of pounds—more than the £27 billion that Railtrack has identified, and possibly even more than the £40 billion said in one survey to be necessary? Where will the money come from? Will the Minister confirm that the much vaunted so-called relaunch of the Government's 10-year plan and £80 billion investment programme is nothing more than the repackaging of money that has already been committed by the private sector and the Government?

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that Railtrack itself has committed to a massive programme of new investment—amounting to £27 billion—in rail infrastructure across the country. Extra rail services are in place, 44 new rail freight terminals have been established since the Government came to power, and, in this period, rail freight movements are up by 15 per cent.

Best Value

3. **Mr. Brian Jenkins** (Tamworth): If he will make a statement about the progress being made by local authorities in developing best value. [103253]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): Good progress is being made to meet the target date of 1 April 2000. The statutory framework for best value, including guidance and the new national performance indicators, is almost complete, and we are working closely with the Audit Commission and the Local Government Association to ensure that all authorities are up to date in their preparations.

Mr. Jenkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. However, will she join me in congratulating many of the smaller local authorities—such as Tamworth borough council—which have for years delivered excellent and improving services while increasing council tax by less than the rate of inflation? Tamworth has been able to do that by stripping out layers of management. Will my hon. Friend not only give a guarantee that small authorities will not be encumbered by any more bureaucracy, but consider using a light touch in administering the policy? May I also have an assurance that small authorities—which, unlike large authorities, are not able to take advantage of economies of scale—will not be faced with a financial burden that they will have to pass on to local council tax payers?

Ms Armstrong: My hon. Friend is to be congratulated on the work that he did as leader of Tamworth council, to ensure that that council was efficient and worked effectively for local people—which, he will appreciate, is the main task of local authorities. Local authorities have not only to work effectively, but to meet local people's aspirations and demands, and the reality is that best value gives local authorities much more flexibility. As the pilots have demonstrated, the best value regime brings palpable improvements.

Several of the pilot authorities are small authorities. I assure my hon. Friend that they are not complaining about bureaucracy, but are saying that best value gives them new opportunities. However, they are also saying that best value requires the involvement of everyone—members and officers—in ensuring that the new approach delivers the very best value to citizens.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The Minister will know that last March the Prime Minister indicated that too many Labour councils were failing to deliver good value services to their citizens. Why is it that, under the

Government's proposals for the best value programme, councils do not have a general requirement to consider tendering?

Ms Armstrong: The hon. and learned Gentleman has perhaps been asleep during our discussions in the House. The legislation made it absolutely clear that the Government—and now the House—do not take an ideological approach. We say that councils have to find the best way forward, whether that involves using an in-house service, a partnership, the voluntary sector or a private sector company. We are looking for the best for the citizen and no single organisation necessarily produces that. So far from Whitehall saying, "We know best," we are saying, "You have a duty locally to deliver the best."

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Why is best value better than compulsory competitive tendering?

Ms Armstrong: It is better precisely because, as has been demonstrated already by the pilot studies, it responds effectively to the aims and aspirations of local people and seeks to get the best quality at the most efficient price. It does not represent an ideological approach, which was all that CCT was about.

Waste Incineration

4. **Mr. Andrew Stunell** (Hazel Grove): What assessment the Government have made of possible health risks arising from waste incineration. [103254]

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): Emissions from incinerators are strictly regulated under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. We are fully alert to health worries relating to incinerators and are confident that the high environmental protection standards set for them mean they do not pose unacceptable risks to health or the environment.

Mr. Stunell: The Minister will be aware that the waste disposal authority in Greater Manchester has the worst record in the country for re-use and recycling, yet it has made proposals for five waste incinerators. Will the Minister tell that authority to put recycling and re-use ahead of incineration in its strategy, and will he enable that to happen by changing the basis of charging to tonnages in Greater Manchester?

Mr. Meacher: The Government will publish their waste management strategy in the next few months. We shall make it very clear that our priority is to shift away from landfill to the maximum feasible increase in recycling. There may be occasions when the best practicable environmental option is incineration rather than recycling, but we look to a role for incineration only where recycling is not appropriate.

I take note of the hon. Gentleman's second point. He should await our paper on that.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the target for recycling in Greater Manchester must increase dramatically? If the authority is looking for an incinerator, it must be combined heat and power, not simply a way of disposing of waste.

Mr. Meacher: I entirely support my hon. Friend on both counts. If we are looking to any increase in incineration, or energy from waste, as it is now more politely called, we certainly expect it to be related to good quality combined heat and power. I also agree with my hon. Friend that the level of recycling—not just in Manchester or indeed my constituency of Oldham, but throughout the country—is pathetically low. Let me make that clear: it is 8 per cent. Our target is to reach 30 per cent. by 2010—that is a fourfold increase. There need to be dramatic increases right across the country and our waste management strategy is intended to provide the drivers to achieve that aim.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Is the Minister aware that in Marchwood in my constituency a large incineration plant was closed down some months ago because of the unacceptably high emissions? Is he further aware that a state of the art, modern incineration plant is planned to replace the old one; and can he guarantee to me and my constituents that the emissions from the new plant will give no reason for concern?

Mr. Meacher: I understand the concern about the local siting of incinerators, which relates mostly to the old generation of incinerators that were phased out as a result of a EU directive in November 1996. We now have much tighter standards. Most concern is caused by dioxins; the current standard is no more than 1 nanogram per cubic metre, which means no more than 1 part in 1 billion. We know from studies by the Environment Agency that incinerators now give rise to no more than 4 per cent. of total dioxins, whereas 10 years ago that figure was 63 per cent. We also support tightening those standards even further and we shall support an EU directive on waste incineration that will raise the dioxin standard tenfold.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): As landfill opportunities diminish throughout the United Kingdom and in spite of best efforts to recycle as much waste as possible, there will always be a need for incineration. What steps will the Minister take to reassure the public and avoid campaigns of opposition to the modern, highly technical and scientifically developed incineration plants?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that incineration will continue to have a place. The simple reason for that is that in this country we currently landfill between 80 to 85 per cent. of municipal waste. Under the landfill directive passed last year, that has to be reduced to no more than 35 per cent. of 1995 levels by 2016. We have to make a massive shift away from landfill. I support the maximum feasible increase in recycling, and that is Government policy, but incineration is bound to have a role.

The question of reassuring the public is a difficult one, because there is great public concern about incinerators. Planning inquiries will continue to be held on the siting of any future incinerators and local communities will have to be persuaded that the plants are safe and will not cause health problems.

We believe that the evidence exists. In 1996, a health study was undertaken by the previous Government of the incidence of cancers near municipal waste incinerators, and it found no increase in cancers in the local population. The study did find some small increase in primary liver cancers, but it is not clear whether that is related to incinerators. Further research is being carried out. We will examine the issue more fully and we intend, as always on environmental issues, to be transparent and publish all the evidence.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): The Minister may be aware that Carlisle city council recently gave permission for a large plant that will burn waste wood. My constituents in the north of the city are deeply concerned about the pollution that will be created by the plant and by the hundreds of heavy goods vehicles that will bring the waste wood to the plant every day. Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that the Environment Agency will examine the proposals thoroughly before any operating licence is issued to the plant?

Mr. Meacher: There is no question but that the Environment Agency, in which I have confidence, undertakes rigorous inquiries before it grants consents. I have no reason to doubt that that is what will happen in my hon. Friend's case, and I shall support that. If there are objections, an open planning inquiry must be held before an inspector and his report must be made public. All objectors have a chance to make their points and they are taken into account. I assure my hon. Friend that that procedure will be thoroughly followed in his case.

Acid Rain

5. **Mr. Elfyn Llwyd** (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): What recent appraisal he has made of ways of limiting the harm done to fish stocks by acid rain. [103255]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): Following the UK signature of the recent UN/ECE protocol, I expect UK emissions of sulphur dioxide, the main cause of acid rain, to fall by 83 per cent. between 1990 and 2010, and the area of ecosystem above the critical load for acidification to decrease by 79 per cent. This action should lead to significant improvements in the condition and numbers of fish stocks.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the Minister for that reply, which is not very satisfactory. I should declare an interest: I am a fisherman, albeit not a very good one.

The serious point is that the native species of upland brown trout is being decimated. The fish cannot breed because of the acidity of the water. Should not the remit and budget of the Environment Agency be extended to cover immediate and proper research into acidity and restocking?

Mr. Mullin: A great deal of work is being done, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that some progress has been made. One problem is that, although the chemical components involved have shown some recovery, the biological ones have not done so yet. The hon. Gentleman is probably aware that the Environment Agency, the Welsh Executive and the Countryside Commission for Wales initiated an investigation into acid water in Wales. An initial report was published in November. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has had an opportunity to see it, but those bodies tell me that they would be happy to make it available to him, even though it was not written for publication. They would also be happy to discuss the matter with him.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Has my hon. Friend been made aware of any connection between acid rain and climatic changes in general? In particular, has any connection been established with the increase in rainfall? There is considerable concern in Wales about the amount of flooding in the past 18 months, which has been greater than at any time in the previous 50 years. My constituents experienced flooding on Christmas Eve, in an area where they would not normally expect it.

Madam Speaker: Order. That is a long way from the original question.

Mr. Smith: I thank you for bearing with me, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I think that I have done very well by the hon. Gentleman. I have extended the good will associated with the time of year, but I am going to move on to another question.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the Minister knows that one of the leading fish farms in the country is situated in the Wey valley in my constituency. The farm suffers greatly from the pollution coming from the Dorchester road, where traffic jams occur all year round. Will he have words with his colleagues to ensure—

Madam Speaker: Order. Come on, we must move on. I am being taken advantage of this afternoon.

Roads Congestion

7. **Miss Julie Kirkbride** (Bromsgrove): By how much he estimates road traffic growth will fall as a result of the Government's decision to reduce expenditure on improving the roads network. [103257]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): This year, the Government are spending £765 million on road maintenance—40 per cent. more than in the last year of Tory rule. Meanwhile, provisional figures show a growth in total road traffic of 3 per cent. between the third quarter of 1997 and 1999. That is a far slower rate of growth than in previous periods of sustained economic expansion: in the mid and late 1980s, annual traffic growth peaked at 5 per cent. and 8 per cent. respectively.

Miss Kirkbride: The Minister's waffling and inaccurate answer clearly demonstrates—*[Interruption.]* The previous Conservative Government spent a great deal more money on roads than this Government would ever dream of spending. However, the Minister's answer shows that yet another Labour promise has been broken. The Government said that they would reduce the rate of

traffic growth simply by not building any more roads. I am pleased that the Minister is telling us that the Government are now prepared to build more roads and bypasses in those parts of the country where they are needed to improve the quality of life and safety of local people. Will he therefore say when the Bordesley bypass in my constituency will be built?

Mr. Hill: I think that the hon. Lady is taking advantage of me. I believe that I heard her accuse the Government of cutting road spending. She has some nerve: in their final four years of power, the previous Conservative Government cut road maintenance by 9 per cent. That left Britain's motorway and trunk road network in the worst condition since records began.

Trunk road maintenance has increased by more than one third in the past three years. This year we are spending £400 million more than in the last year of Tory rule, and next year it will be £530 million more. We are firmly on track to achieving our objective of reversing the decline in motorway and trunk road conditions by 2002. Meanwhile, we are encouraged by the present indications of a slowdown in road traffic growth despite the success of the economy, which is good news for our environment and our communities.

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): Has my hon. Friend noted the repeated comments made in the letter from the Government office of the south-east to my local authority, Brighton and Hove council, about that council's success in holding car traffic growth in central Brighton? The letter states that this has no doubt contributed to

"an improved environment for business, shoppers and visitors to Brighton".

Will he join me in congratulating my local authority and its partners—particularly the bus company—on their achievement? Does he agree that sensible strategies to encourage bus use and on parking, agreed through local consultation, are essential to good local transport plans?

Mr. Hill: I am delighted to congratulate Brighton and Hove on its outstanding record in terms of new bus schemes, which have led to a significant increase in bus patronage in recent years—roughly 20 per cent. in the past 12 months alone. Brighton, like many Labour authorities, is leading the way in terms of the development of bus quality partnerships. I had the great pleasure and privilege yesterday of turning the first sod at the excellent new bus quality partnership in the town of South Shields. I congratulate South Shields, Brighton and many other Labour authorities.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Not only has the long-suffering motorist suffered from the cuts in the Government's roads programme—we now have bad news on the local transport settlement. Last year, 74.5 per cent. of the settlement was in supplementary credit approval and 25.5 per cent. was in transport supplementary grant. This year, we have had the announcement of a higher figure, and we have of course had the hype. However, when we look at the figures in detail, we see that 98.2 per cent. is in supplementary credit approval and only 1.8 per cent. is in transport supplementary grant. That is called moving the burden from Whitehall to the town hall, and it is bad news for local authorities and motorists. Will the Minister explain why we have had the worst transport supplementary grant settlement in history?

Mr. Hill: Well, it is the season of goodwill, and the hon. Gentleman is something of a novice on the Front Bench. Nevertheless, I find his observations on local transport settlements outrageous. In December, we announced the Government's decisions on local transport, which represented an increase across the board of 27 per cent. in terms of road maintenance provision and an increase in terms of public transport provision of 24 per cent. That was an outstanding settlement, and it was the beginning of an additional £700 million that will go to local authorities and local transport plans over the next three years.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Is it not just excellent that Labour-controlled Lancashire council embarked yesterday on another phase of the reconstruction of the rural moss roads network in my constituency? Is it not just marvellous that local communities and councils coming together will be able to use their new designation of objective 2—hopefully, some will use their designation under single regeneration budget 6 and 7—to reconstruct entirely that network, which was so grievously neglected by the previous Conservative Government? Will my hon. Friend join me in the hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's statement at 3.30 pm will give some funding to the excellent Garstang super-8 minibus project to revitalise public transport in that rural area?

Mr. Hill: I find myself in considerable agreement with my hon. Friend.

8. **Mr. Mark Oaten** (Winchester): What immediate plans he has to reduce congestion levels on roads. [103258]

12. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): If he will make a statement on the level of traffic congestion in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1999. [103263]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): As I have already said in a previous answer, provisional traffic data suggest that total road traffic in Great Britain grew by nearly 3 per cent. between the third quarters of 1997 and 1999—a slower rate of growth than in previous peaks of the economic cycle.

Our strategy and measures for reducing congestion are set out in our integrated transport White Paper "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone", published in 1998. These are already delivering results, and the proposals in the Transport Bill currently before the House are designed to strengthen the powers available to local authorities to tackle congestion.

Mr. Oaten: Is it Government policy to achieve a decrease in the number of cars using the roads, or have they now accepted that there will be an increase, and is their policy to try and slow it down?

Mr. Hill: The real issue is tackling congestion. Various studies have shown that there is no necessary or direct correlation between congestion and road traffic growth, and also that a more targeted approach may be more effective in dealing with congestion and its effects in specific locations.

The Government believe that congestion is best tackled by a package of measures, including new and additional investment in public transport as well as road improvements, many of which we have already implemented. We also believe that congestion charging is likely to prove among the most effective of those measures. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman's own city of Winchester is actively considering a workplace parking levy. I am also pleased that Hampshire has joined the Government's charging development partnership, which is the right way to tackle congestion in our urban areas.

Mr. Leigh: Will the Minister now do me the courtesy of answering my Question 12, which he grouped with Question 8, because he does not want to answer it? I remind him that it asks:

"If he will make a statement on the level of traffic congestion in (a) 1997 and (b) 1999."

I asked about congestion; I did not ask for vague words about growth. The truth is that the Government are not prepared to own up, so they want to make us motorists pay up.

Mr. Hill: It was the previous Government who invented road congestion. They started out with 70 cars per mile, spent £70 billion on new roads, and ended up with 100 cars per mile. The Tories are the last people from whom this Government need lessons on tackling road congestion. We have set out clear plans in our integrated transport White Paper for dealing with congestion and we are pursuing them with vigour and determination. In the mean time, we are putting an extra £1.8 billion into improving local and public transport over the next three years and are increasing expenditure on road maintenance by 10 per cent. this year. Instead of the Tory wish list of road schemes, we have a targeted programme of 37 trunk road improvements, 19 of them bypasses which will relieve the pressure on local communities. In addition, we are spending an extra £170 million on rural bus services. That has resulted in an extra 1,800 new and enhanced bus services so far—a commitment to rural transport that the hon. Gentleman's Government never contemplated making.

Mr. Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow): Will the Minister tell me what efforts he is making in bringing forward the construction of the new Tyne crossing in Jarrow? It will have a significant impact on traffic congestion as well as enhancing employment prospects.

Mr. Hill: I understand the problems to which my hon. Friend alludes—indeed, I was in his constituency only yesterday. We are considering the matter with the utmost urgency and seriousness.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on the efforts that he and his colleagues are making to reduce traffic congestion, in sharp contrast to the legacy of 100 cars per mile that we inherited from the previous Tory Government? Will he look further at ways of reducing traffic congestion, particularly on our residential roads, by, for example, increasing funding to schemes such as home zones? We in Luton believe that we have the first one in the United Kingdom. Will my hon. Friend consider increasing funding so that we may reduce congestion in residential areas and increase safety?

Mr. Hill: I am delighted to learn that Luton is in the vanguard of the home zone strategy. The Government are very committed to proposals for home zones; we have already provided for eight pilot schemes, one of which is in my hon. Friend's constituency. We have great confidence that they are an important development in the creation of a safe environment for pedestrians in urban areas. We anticipate the success of the current pilot projects, and hope to see the development of many more in due course.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): What lessons have the Government learned on tackling congestion from the ban on cars to the dome and the ban on cars in central London on new year's eve? Is not it a great Labour lie that their public transport can handle all the travellers that such bans and Labour's general anti-car policies produce? Does the Minister realise that more stations need to be open, more train services need to be running and more ticket offices need to be open so that travellers are able to buy tickets—as Mrs. Blair found out? Does he agree that difficulty in getting to the dome is one of the main reasons that the big top is being written off as the big flop?

Mr. Hill: More, more.

I know how authoritative the right hon. Gentleman is on these public transport matters. Indeed, shortly before Christmas, I had the great pleasure of reading an article that he had written in *Sunday Business*, entitled "How I would make the trains run on time". It was a fascinating piece of work from our own home-grown Mussolini—the Il Duce of the home counties. The article contained 14 proposals, all of which involved additional Government expenditure—from a member of the Conservative party, which is committed to reducing Government expenditure. It included a proposal for a car park at the right hon. Gentleman's station of Wokingham, but I noticed that, subsequently, the station-master wrote back to say that a car park already existed.

As for the arrangements in central London and around the dome, there had to be a traffic limitation zone, simply to accommodate the vast number of people who were coming into central London that day. The central London event—like the dome—was a fabulous success. Three million Londoners thoroughly enjoyed themselves. If the right hon. Gentleman had any capacity for enjoyment, which I seriously doubt, and had been there, I think that he would have enjoyed it as well.

Mr. Redwood *rose—*

Hon. Members: More. More.

Mr. Redwood: Perhaps the Minister would like to explain to all those people who spent three, four or five hours stumbling home in the dark, trying to avoid the crush, how one could possibly say that that was a triumph.

If that is new Labour's idea of a triumph, they will not be in government for long. The Deputy Prime Minister himself said that if the Government could not run a successful millennium show at the dome, they deserved to be cast into darkness. That is exactly what they deserve. People had a dreadful time trying to get home on new year's eve and on new year's night. I hope that Ministers will hold a proper inquiry, and that they will apologise to all those people whose trains broke down, who were thrust against crush barriers at closed stations and who had to walk miles to try to find an open station, while Ministers were nowhere to be seen to explain to them how they could get home.

Mr. Hill: Frankly, that is the height of opportunism and irresponsibility. The truth is that an enormous number of people were in the centre of London—nearly half the population of the city. Simply for safety reasons, some tube station closures were necessary. If the right hon. Gentleman is advocating that those stations should have stayed open, he would have endangered the lives of many people who were there to enjoy themselves. I repeat that, if the right hon. Gentleman had attended the events and had spoken seriously to many of the people who were there, he would have known that they all had a fabulous night out. London can be proud of itself for the wonderful, world-class show that it mounted on millennium eve.

Housing

9. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What measures his Department proposes to take to help those local authorities with large numbers of empty houses in the *(a)* private and *(b)* public sector. [103260]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): My Department is supporting the work of the Empty Homes Agency. We are also considering the recommendations of the report of the unpopular housing policy action team into the causes and consequences of low demand for housing in some areas.

Mr. Pike: I thank the Minister for that answer. I am sure that he will know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning wrote to me last week suggesting his willingness to come to Burnley to examine the problem of empty houses. Unfortunately, my hon. Friend was taken into hospital on Friday, but I am glad to hear that he is now at home. I am sure that we all want to extend our good wishes for his speedy recovery.

I thank the Government for their help with the residual debt problem with public sector housing. My hon. Friend the Minister will know that Burnley has 3,000 empty houses in the private sector. The cost of demolishing them is large and there is no site value afterwards. That is causing major ripple effects throughout the whole housing sector in Burnley. I know that that problem is not unique, but councils, such as Burnley, need Government help to try to solve it.

Mr. Mullin: I am glad to report to the House that my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning is now well on the way to recovery.

I have the greatest sympathy for the situation in which councils, such as Burnley, find themselves. Sunderland, the city that I partly represent, has a similar problem. There is no single answer. Each local authority has to devise its own strategy, but some selective demolition is inevitable. That nettle must be grasped. When doing that, it is important to consult residents and all those whose interests are directly affected.

A big reduction in greenfield planning permissions and a better use of brownfield sites is another thing that would help. It never ceases to amaze me that many authorities—I shall name no names—that have serious problems with derelict housing in the inner cities are still granting greenfield planning permissions simultaneously. That only exacerbates the problem.

On the promise of my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning to visit Burnley, I am sure that he will do so at the first available opportunity.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The whole House will wish to join in sending best wishes to the Minister for Housing and Planning.

Is it not clear that the simplest and most direct measure to deal with the problem of empty homes is to reduce the level of VAT on home refurbishments and repair, as has been sought by Lord Rogers of Riverside, the Empty Homes Agency, housing associations and local authorities? Will the Minister note that, last September, the French Government reduced their VAT on such refurbishment and repair to 5 per cent., with full European Union consent? Is not that an excellent example of the downward harmonisation of taxes that the Government could adopt rapidly?

Mr. Mullin: It was of course a measure that the right hon. Gentleman's Government could have adopted at any time over the past few years. We are well aware of the recommendation made by the Rogers committee, but it is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is being considered.

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): Will my hon. Friend consider another aspect of the problem of empty local authorities properties? In the London borough of Wandsworth, countless properties throughout the borough are empty and boarded up solely to be sold. An enormous number of people live and have roots in the borough, but they have no opportunity to obtain local authority housing because it is sold to people who have no links whatever with the borough.

Mr. Mullin: The practice that my hon. Friend describes only exacerbates the serious problems of housing shortage in London and especially for those on low incomes. The quicker that such housing is brought back into use—and preferably for those on lower incomes who cannot afford the huge prices that are being paid for property in London—the better.

Vehicle Emissions

10. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): By how much he estimates transport-related emissions of greenhouse gases will fall as a result of the Government's policies towards motorists. [103261]

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The growth in greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector will be reduced as a result of the fiscal policies, technology and the measures that we announced in the transport White Paper. Our 1998 climate change consultation paper suggested that those measures could save about 6 million tonnes of carbon in 2010. We are currently updating those estimates and will publish revised figures in our draft climate change programme shortly.

Mr. O'Brien: Although I welcome any improvements in climate change problems, that answer demonstrates just how much the Government's policies for cars and the hard-pressed British motorist is informed by concern about vehicle emissions that lead to global warming. That source makes up only a fraction of the sources of global warming that emanate from this country. Will the Secretary of State tell us what steps the Government are now taking to reduce emissions from dirty, coal fired power stations?

Mr. Prescott: I do not think that the amount of greenhouse gases and CO_2 emitted by cars is insignificant; it is approximately 25 per cent. of all emissions, and it is the fastest-growing sector. That is why we have identified the package of measures to which I have referred, and we shall be discussing other areas of contribution to the reduction of greenhouse gases, such as those that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and the climate change levy in our proposals, which we will bring to the House shortly.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton (Leeds, North–East): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the best ways to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases from vehicles is further to encourage the development of alternative fuels? He mentioned new technologies in an earlier reply, but what plans does his Department have to promote the infrastructure development for those alternative fuels which is so essential to developing more vehicles that use those fuels?

Mr. Prescott: Such proposals are among the group of measures that we are considering at the moment, and we have been actively consulting on those. We shall produce those measures in our document shortly.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that unless the Government set a national target for road traffic reduction, transport-related emissions of CO_2 will continue to rise? Does he agree that the Government need to lead by example and scrap free car parking spaces at the House of Commons for Members of Parliament?

Mr. Prescott: The hon. Gentleman's last point is a typical Liberal point, and it can be left to the House to make a judgment on that at the appropriate time. We have made it clear that we do not accept the argument that we can set the national targets to reduce emissions from cars, as he mentioned, and the Commission for Integrated Transport has supported that view. We are concerned to deal with congestion and pollution, and the package of measures that we are putting forward will do that.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that if people purchase a new vehicle that runs on alternative fuel, it will not be more expensive than other cars? Such cars ought to be cheaper. The complicated system in which people claim back money when they buy a vehicle that runs on alternative fuel ought to be made easier or disposed of.

Mr. Prescott: I agree with my hon. Friend, and we are looking at procedures by which we can achieve that.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I seek the Deputy Prime Minister's advice and help. Does he not accept that transport-related emissions of greenhouse gases will increase in north-east Cheshire unless he grants money for the Poynton bypass and the Manchester airport eastern link road, because inevitably the second runway will, despite the increase in public transport, cause a huge increase in car transport requiring access to the airport?

Mr. Prescott: I thought for a moment that we were going to have another Member crossing the Chamber. [HON. MEMBERS: "No, no."] That was a joke, in case anybody thought I was trying to be serious.

The hon. Gentleman has always found rather ingenious ways of bringing up the road programme that he is concerned about. Our measures relate to congestion and pollution, and the package that we are putting forward will help to reduce those problems. As I have announced today, in Cheshire some £640,000 has been given to improve the public transport system.

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): I am afraid that, as ever, the Secretary of State is providing aspirations but no effective action to help the environment. I urge him to take a positive view not only of the suggestions from a couple of his hon. Friends but of our common-sense proposals to cut the tax on fuels that produce low or no emissions of greenhouse gases and to cut the duty on the cars that use them. Conservative Members want to use lower taxes to help motorists and the environment. Why does he persist in clobbering the motorist with high-tax policies that have done nothing to improve air quality in this country?

Mr. Prescott: It is a bit much to hear that from someone on the Opposition Front Bench when we scrapped the fuel duty escalator that the Conservatives brought in. That is certainly one major change that has taken place. As for the proposals by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) about making greener cars, I have to say that some of them are ideas that we have already implemented, some are clearly contradictory and some are not even consistent with the facts. We have a package of measures that are putting us on the road to achieving the Kyoto targets that we have set ourselves for 2010.

West Midlands (Economic Strategy)

11. **Mr. Richard Burden** (Birmingham, Northfield): If he will make a statement on progress with the implementation of the economic strategy document for the west midlands submitted by Advantage West Midlands. [103262]

The Minister for Local Government and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): We have been considering the west midlands regional economic strategy alongside those of the other seven English regional development authorities, and we will be writing to each of the RDAs later this week outlining our formal response. Ministers will also be meeting the RDA chairmen this week to discuss implementing the strategies.

Mr. Burden: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does she agree with me that regional development authorities have a tremendously important role to play both in combating social exclusion and in wealth creation? That is particularly the case in the west midlands, which has not always fitted easily into traditional conceptions of north-south divides but where there are significant areas of deprivation and the need for industrial transformation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if RDAs are to fulfil their role, they need sufficient resources and the maximum flexibility to employ resources according to locally determined needs and priorities?

Ms Armstrong: The Government's responses to the RDAs this week will demonstrate that in each region there has been a serious attempt to consider the issues of wealth creation and of regeneration that are necessary to tackle both the imbalances within regions—that applies to every region—and between regions. We are determined that we will work with RDAs to enable them to develop strategies and to implement them, working with the range of partners that it is essential that they bring in to ensure that in each region there is a recognised real way forward that will make a significant difference.

Road Safety

13. **Mrs. Helen Brinton** (Peterborough): What measures he is taking to increase safety on the roads. [103264]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I acknowledge my hon. Friend's work in promoting home zones and other general road safety measures. Of course we want to see significant reductions in the numbers of people killed and seriously injured on our roads. We shall shortly be publishing a new road safety strategy, which will include new casualty reduction targets for 2010.

Mrs. Brinton: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Does she agree that reducing speed limits would considerably improve road safety, especially on rural roads? Is she aware of a recent MORI poll that showed that the majority of Great British motorists support the reduction of speed limits, especially on country lanes? Does she conclude with me that by reducing speed limits we shall improve safety not only for cyclists and pedestrians but for the British motorist?

Ms Hughes: We recognise that speed is a major road safety and environmental issue in rural areas. It is perhaps the most crucial determinant of overall levels of road safety. In addition to a range of road safety measures that we have instituted since the general election, at the end of 1998 we introduced a major 12 months' review of speed policy. A report will be published shortly, which will include specific proposals for speed limits in rural areas.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does the Minister recognise that newer drivers are involved in a greater percentage of accidents than other motorists? Will she consider the use of green probation plates on cars and perhaps differential speed limits for newer drivers, to ascertain what impact that that could have in reducing road accidents?

Ms Hughes: Certainly. Issues relating to improving the safety performance of drivers will be included in the road safety review. They will arise also from the speed review. We have already introduced a number of measures, including improving the practical driving test, the theory part of that test, implementing the Road Traffic (New Drivers) Act 1995 and revising the highway code. Those measures acknowledge that drivers have a role to play in improving road safety, and especially in reducing speed.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Unlike the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), I do not want another inch of road to be built in my constituency at present. However, I want maximum priority to be given to investment in road safety improvements. That issue should be the top priority of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions when determining whether roads should be built. Will my hon. Friend the Minister give an assurance that that will be the case and ensure that local authorities are given all possible support in promoting investment in road safety?

Ms Hughes: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. In addition to identifying new targets for reducing the number of deaths and serious injuries, the road safety strategy that we shall soon publish will address child safety, safety of other vulnerable road users and motorcycle safety—the whole range of road safety issues. As for his final point, we have already given local authorities considerable additional powers, including the ability to reduce speed limits to 20 mph without Government consent. We shall encourage local authorities to integrate safety policy in their local transport plans.

Stamp Duty

14. **Mr. Adrian Sanders** (Torbay): What assessment he has made of the effect of stamp duty on large-scale voluntary housing transfers. [103265]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): Local authorities have to pay stamp duty when they transfer their housing stock to a non-charitable housing association. I am not aware that that has caused significant problems for those authorities on the transfer programme.

Mr. Sanders: Will the Minister take a look at that issue? It seems nonsense that there is a tax take from a system that is supposed to put more money into repair and renovation. That is the whole purpose of transfer, yet there is a clawback to the Treasury in the form of stamp duty, and there have been mutterings from potential transfer authorities that it is a disincentive to their taking that action.

Mr. Mullin: As the hon. Gentleman knows, transfer is bringing in large sums of money to local authorities for investment in housing, and it will do so in Torbay. If Torbay wants to avoid paying stamp duty, it has the option of transferring to a charitable housing association.

Community Finance Tax Credit

3.32 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to introduce a tax credit to encourage investment in community finance institutions to enable development of social enterprise in areas of deprivation.

I dedicate the Bill to the memory of my mother, Beattie Colman, who died last Thursday and who inspired me.

I believe that, over the past two years, there has been growing recognition of the fact that our markets are not serving the most deprived communities in this country by providing the access to credit that they need. That has meant that not enough capital flows into projects that can offer the greatest social return.

Several initiatives are working to address the problem by being lenders where it matters, in areas suffering a capital famine. Community reinvestment—the subject of my previous 10-minute Bill—is one such initiative, and community finance institutions lend to enterprises that are regarded as being unbankable. Borrowers frequently graduate from community finance initiatives to mainstream lenders: community finance initiatives serve as a vital stepping stone. However, current needs outstrip both projects and the financing for those projects. There is a clear need for far greater investment in the initiatives, to enable them to achieve true potential.

The problem was highlighted by the report of the social exclusion unit's policy action team on enterprise and social exclusion, which makes excellent recommendations, some of which have been speedily acted on. In his pre-Budget statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a £30 million programme to promote better access to finance and business support, so as to stimulate enterprise in deprived areas. I warmly welcome that programme, which is now being developed by the Department of Trade and Industry, as it has the potential to kick start the growth of the community finance sector. However, a community finance tax credit will help to build a community finance sector that is sustainable in the long term.

The Bill acts on another recommendation of the enterprise and social exclusion report, which argued that the Treasury and the Inland Revenue should examine a tax relief for individual investors in community finance. Such a tax relief would encourage people to invest in addressing the needs of deprived communities. Gaining the support of private investors will be critical to building a sustainable funding base for community finance projects, so that they are not dependent on Government funding rounds. In addition, attracting individual investors brings people involvement, which is a vital ingredient in community initiatives.

The establishment of a thriving community finance sector would be a major step toward creating an enterprise society for all. By establishing a tax credit, the Bill would encourage investment in community finance by giving it recognition. We currently offer tax relief to those who invest in enterprise for personal profit and enable tax-efficient giving to charitable causes; but, as yet, we give no tax relief to investors for social purposes. That may be because the thinking on lending to help others is less well understood, but by encouraging such investing we can potentially free up large volumes of new money for our deprived communities.

In seeking support for the Bill, I have spoken to the Treasury, the Inland Revenue and members of the Social Investment Forum of the UK—banks and community finance institutions working to promote new lending in the community.

For example, CityLife, an industrial and provident society, has pioneered the concept of social investment bonds. Its first bond was issued last year to address unemployment in Sheffield. Investors lent their money for five years at zero interest. The bond issue raised £787,000, primarily from the Sheffield public and leading Sheffield figures, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade. With matching funds from various sources, that releases a total of almost £2 million to the city.

By asking people to lend rather than to give money, the bond released more money over a shorter time for an unpopular cause—the unemployed. Investors said that they had lent 10 times more than they would have donated. CityLife believes that that is new money, which is drawn from people's savings rather than from their income. Most of the investors in the Sheffield bond are drawn from the wealthier areas of the city. CityLife is planning community bonds in 30 more cities across the UK, but it and others believe that the impact of such work could increase with the recognition and incentive of a tax credit.

Investors in community finance are giving up the use of their capital for spending or for more lucrative investing. They are forgoing the interest of the capital and in many cases are seeing their capital depreciate. Market research commissioned by NatWest showed that 18 per cent. of the general public would be interested in investing in a product such as the bank's community bond, but that figure would rise to 31 per cent. if a tax incentive were involved. Investors in the NatWest community bond save between £500 and £250,000 for one or three years.

There are cases abroad of tax relief levering in considerable funds to particular types of investment vehicles. In the Netherlands, a new tax relief for green funds was introduced in January 1995, following campaigning by the Triodos bank. Since then, six banks have introduced green funds, with a combined fund volume adding up to about 1 billion euros. The funds offer tax exemption for private investors on interest or dividends from green investment funds. That enables the funds to offer loans to green projects at favourable rates. The Dutch Government view the initiative as a great success, as it fulfils its objective by reducing the financial burden for green projects, while attracting a large public to the field of green investment.

However, the Dutch initiative cannot be directly translated to the UK context of community finance. Community finance initiatives are at an early stage in their development, and a tax credit must recognise that. Following my discussions with the Inland Revenue and the Treasury, I believe that at this stage we need a tax relief that goes direct to the community finance institutions.

I therefore propose a model suggested to me by the Charities Aid Foundation, which runs a loan fund called Investors in Society. That was launched in 1996 with £500,000 seed capital. The fund has now grown to £4.5 million. It has approved loans or credit facilities for 85 initiatives.

[Mr. Tony Colman]

The model that I propose would give tax credit to the CFI on money invested by private individuals, companies or other tax-paying bodies. To be eligible for the tax credit, the money would be lent at below market or zero interest to a community finance initiative registered with the Inland Revenue. The tax credit would be available to the CFI if it used the money for on-lending or for investing in micro-enterprise or small business for the relief of poverty or unemployment; community-based regeneration where the ultimate benefit was not personal profit; organisations or activities whose purposes were recognised as charitable by the Charity Commission or the Inland Revenue; the issue of charity or community bonds such as the Sheffield employment bond; and any of these purposes for overseas beneficiaries, as well as in the UK.

By targeting the tax credit at the CFI, it is hoped that the model would give maximum benefit to the community finance sector. It is arguable that a tax relief to corporate or individual taxpayers would free up greater volumes, but from my discussions with the Treasury and the Inland Revenue, I believe that at this stage we are looking for a simple mechanism to boost the development of community finance. However, over time it would be worth examining the potential impact of other tax relief for community finance.

The Government are showing their commitment to community finance. My hon. Friend the Financial Secretary is launching a new fund at the Aston Reinvestment Trust tomorrow. Aston Reinvestment Trust is piloting a new £400,000 fund with the support of the European Union. It will make loans of between £2,000 and £40,000 to community enterprises and voluntary organisations unable to access finance from conventional sources.

The Department of Trade and Industry with the Phoenix fund now offers challenge fund and guarantee fund money to community finance initiatives. However, as yet we do not have an additional incentive to get individuals and corporate investment to make the significant impact that is possible through investing in our deprived communities. The Bill offers the opportunity to make that impact by tackling tax relief for investors in community finance, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Tony Colman, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Mr. Gareth R. Thomas, and Mr. Tom Brake.

COMMUNITY FINANCE TAX CREDIT

Mr. Tony Colman accordingly presented a Bill to introduce a tax credit to encourage investment in community finance institutions to enable development of social enterprise in areas of deprivation: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March, and to be printed [Bill 44].

Orders of the Day

Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill

[Relevant documents: The Tenth Report from the Social Security Committee of Session 1998–99 on The 1999 Child Support White Paper (HC 798) and the Government's Response thereto (Cm 4536).]

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the House—I am sorry, in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I regret to say that Back-Bench speeches are limited to 15 minutes today, as demand to speak is so great.

3.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It gives me great comfort to know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House has not tabled an amendment to the Bill.

The Bill takes welfare reform a stage further by introducing reforms in three key areas. First, it tackles the inherited mess of child support and will help more than 1 million children who miss out on the help that they should get. Secondly, the Bill strengthens the links between the benefits that people receive and their debts to society, and provides for new action to reinforce community sentences. Thirdly, it introduces the second stage of our pension reforms, which will help more than 14 million people—the low paid, carers and others who have lost out in the past.

The Bill contains several other measures, including changes that will bring the war pensions appeals system up to date and toughen fraud inspectors' powers. They all build on reforms that have been made since the election, and promote opportunity, reduce dependency and provide greater security—in short, everything that a modern welfare state should do.

We are determined to ensure that children get the best possible start in life. We are the first Government to be committed to eradicating child poverty in a generation and to halving it in 10 years. We are determined to end the scandal of child poverty, which wrote off a whole generation of children who were born at the wrong time in the wrong place under a Tory Government. Reforming the Child Support Agency will help to achieve that.

We are also committed to making work pay, getting more than 125,000 young people off dependency and into work through the new deal and tightening the benefit system to stop abuse. The Bill takes that a step further. We are also tackling another Tory legacy—pensioner poverty—today and in future with long-term reforms to the pension system.

I want to focus on the three main reforms: child support, community punishments and pensions. However, I shall, of course, be happy to answer questions on other measure in the Bill. First I shall speak about our reforms in part I of the Bill to sort out the CSA. Our starting point is that the primary responsibility for looking after children

lies squarely with both parents, whether they live together or apart. The Government have to ensure that, when parents live apart there is an effective system of child support in place. That is not the case at the moment. We must ensure that the child support system makes sure that children get the support to which they are entitled and on which they depend.

The current system has failed children. The agency spends 90 per cent. of its time chasing information and only 10 per cent. ensuring that money gets through. Consequently, only 300,000 of the 1.5 million children on the agency's books gain from maintenance paid; only 100,000 receive all the money that is due to them. It is worth bearing in mind that by 2004 we reckon that 2 million children will be on the CSA books.

Under the new system that we propose, mothers and their children—it is usually mothers, though not exclusively so—will get what they are due, and quickly. The system that we inherited is also failing those parents who live apart from their children but want to support them. As hon. Members will know, the agency often needs so much information to work out how much is due that it can take months before a decision is made. As a result, parents can face huge debts through no fault of their own. Our reforms will change all that and, as a result, more than 1 million children who miss out today will receive help.

Mr. Eric Illsley (Barnsley, Central): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech. During consideration of the Bill, and particularly in Committee, will he look at perhaps giving the CSA powers to investigate fraud, which could improve its decision-making process? As I understand it, the agency has no such powers and investigations have to be passed to the Benefits Agency, which leads to breakdowns in communication and certain delays. I am sure that the agency's situation would improve if it were given those powers.

Mr. Darling: I am well aware of that problem and we shall introduce through the Bill the power to appoint inspectors to investigate cases in general. Under the present system, if there are complaints about a case, uncertainties or suspected wrongdoing we have to appoint an inspector who is designated to a particular case. That takes time. We propose to designate inspectors who shall have general powers to investigate suspected wrongdoing and see whether anything needs to be done. With regard to fraud, it should be borne in mind that the Department of Social Security and its agencies ought to operate far more closely together, which I have been encouraging. I want to avoid having several different fraud arms, because fraud is a specialist field, but I am mindful of the point made by my hon. Friend. The whole system will depend on us being able to fix and pay the right amount quickly, so we do not want delays involving papers being passed from office to office. The new powers to appoint inspectors to look at individual cases will go some way to dealing with that.

Before I deal with our proposals, I want to deal with the Liberals and the lawyers, if I may put it that way, who want us to go back to the courts. I speak as someone who practised in the courts and has some experience in this area. It is important to dispose of this matter once and for all. Those of us who have worked in the divorce courts know that going back to the courts is not the answer. It is worth bearing in mind that in 1979—to take a date at random—slightly more than half lone parents on income support received maintenance. The rest did not. By 1990, the courts were getting money to less than half that figure. Those of us who have worked in the courts will know that decisions are often unpredictable, unreliable and unfair.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): They still are.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman says that they still are, but it is Liberal policy to go back to the courts, which is absolute nonsense. Certainly in my experience, income support, like rock bands, was something that judges did not know much about. The result was that those who were arguing on behalf of a client on income support were frequently met with a completely blank expression from the person on the Bench, who had not a clue what they were talking about because the numbers were so small. He did not recognise that such numbers could possibly exist.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): My right hon. Friend is looking for a temporary sheriff's job.

Mr. Darling: I do not think that I want to be a temporary sheriff. The important point is that going back to the courts would not only resurrect unfairness and all those uncertainties, but would cost £800 million a year—a fourfold increase in the cost of running the CSA. I do not know whether the Liberals have thought about that policy, but I should point out to them that the cost of going back to the courts would eat up almost half the extra penny on income tax that they want to raise, allegedly for improving education. I understand the lawyers' interest in the point, but if the Liberals seriously want to go back to the courts they have to reflect on the fact that putting 1 million cases into the court system would not only involve a cost, but would completely jam the system. That would prejudice the interests of not only children, but the whole civil and criminal justice system. I do not believe that their policy has any credibility whatever.

Dr. Godman *rose—*

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and then to the hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh).

Dr. Godman: I welcome the provisions of clause 10, but may I ask whether the Government intend to extend legal aid to child support appeal tribunals? What is the point of an appeals system if adequate representation is not possible?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that the Government do not intend to extend legal aid to the tribunals. The tribunal system is there, and it works. When it was established, the idea was to try to keep lawyers out of it. We hope that, by simplifying the

[Mr. Darling]

system, we can substantially reduce the number of people who want to go to tribunals, and thus make the system fairer.

I shall stop knocking lawyers now, as one day I may wish to practise in the courts again.

Miss McIntosh: I come from the same legal system as the Secretary of State, although I may not have the same breadth of experience. Does he agree that, before 1979, the courts often found solutions to the problems involved in further settlements following divorce faster than the CSA, and that, moreover, the CSA has failed in its first duty to find lost parents who are not known to it?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Lady has raised a number of points. I do not agree that the courts always found a solution faster; it is true that an interim solution could be found, but it was not always satisfactory.

The hon. Lady is right—and this lies at the heart of what is currently wrong with the CSA—in saying that, in too many instances, it takes months to calculate the money that is due. That causes arrears to build up—often through no fault of their own—for parents living away from home, and meanwhile the children do not receive any money. The problem of absent parents can be a problem in the courts as well as the CSA, although I hope that the additional powers that we are giving the CSA will help.

The hon. Lady brings me to the central point of the Bill. It will abolish the existing complex formula, and introduce a much simpler rate and far more predictable decisions. There is already a reckoner on the back of the White Paper enabling people to calculate easily how much will be due to them. Decisions will be made within days rather than months of an application. The idea is that, once the amount has been fixed, the absent parent can be told how much is due. The money will start flowing faster, and everyone will know where they stand.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I favour the prescribing of a fixed amount, but is not the Secretary of State misdirecting himself? The current problem with the CSA is not the arithmetic, but establishing an individual's income, along with that individual's willingness to be constantly reassessed and his unwillingness to pay what strikes him as an unreasonable amount.

Mr. Darling: The arithmetic is certainly part of the problem. At present, it is necessary to take into account not just income but a number of allowances and disregards, and several other factors, before deciding on a figure. Because about 100 items of information are needed, two things can happen. Even in the case of the most willing parent, circumstances can change before the calculation is made. Moreover, a parent who is simply stringing the agency—and, more important, the child—along can delay, or refuse to hand over certain bits of information.

I do not know exactly what the hon. Gentleman is proposing with regard to fixed charges. If I misunderstood him, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State will deal with his point when he winds up the debate; but I think that a fixed amount would be grossly unfair. Children are entitled to share in their parents' income, and it would be wrong to allow those who are earning a good deal of money to pay a flat rate when they could well afford to pay more.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy) *rose—*

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I seem to have got one or two hon. Members excited. I shall give way first to the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd).

Mr. Llwyd: I have no brief to defend the lawyers, although I am a lawyer myself, but may I ask a simple question? What measures does the Bill contain to tie down the unscrupulous absent parent who is self-employed and does not want to play ball?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are taking powers to get access to the Inland Revenue records of a self-employed person who refuses to tell us how much he is earning. Clearly, we will not want to do that routinely, but we all have constituents who tell us that they are getting absolutely nothing while the self-employed absent parent can be seen driving around the town and living an opulent life. That will stop under the new system.

As the House is more than just a gathering of lawyers, I give way to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton).

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am not a lawyer, but I want to ask a straightforward question. The Secretary of State has talked about most parents being interested in their children. How many parents who divorce or separate are not prepared to work out together what is in the best interests of their child by way of maintenance? We are setting up a new panoply of bureaucracy when quite a large percentage of people would be prepared to enter into an arrangement to support their children.

Mr. Darling: The answer to the hon. Gentleman's straight question is that just under one third of absent parents refuse to co-operate with the agency; usually, they are fathers. In an ideal world, all separating couples would come to an agreement because that is in the best interests of their children. With regard to the rest of the case load, Members will be familiar with the phenomenon where people, because of other things that are going on, will not co-operate at the start, but gradually co-operate later.

I disagree with the hon. Member for Macclesfield on one point: far from creating a great bureaucracy, we are simplifying the present bureaucracy, so that the agency will need to know only who is the absent parent and how much that person earns. It will do the calculation—the amount will be 15, 20 or 25 per cent. of income, depending on the number of children and whether those children are in a second family. Then it can say that that is the amount that the absent parent is due to pay. Absent parents should enter into the agreement immediately. If they do not stick to it, one strike and they are out. We will deduct the money from their wages.

The system will be much simpler. If we can get rid of all the hassle and opportunities for ducking and dodging, many people who are fighting a completely different fight

with their former husband or wife will have their minds concentrated on the fact that the CSA can now fix the amount due quickly and get that money paid.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): That is good news to many people who are concerned, but one thing still concerns me. Will the agency have powers physically to trace someone who is consciously trying to evade being found? I know that the Department says frequently that that is not the agency's function, but there is nothing worse than one parent spending a lot of time finding out where the ex-partner is, only to be told that the agency does not have the power to follow that up. It happens far too often.

Mr. Darling: I am aware of the problems. I have a constituency case where that has happened. I am not sure that the agency needs additional powers to find someone. In that case and others that have been raised in right hon. and hon. Members' correspondence with me, the mother has said where the absent father lives and where the bank account is. Several months elapse before anything happens, by which time he has cleaned out the bank account or pushed off.

The key is to get things moving quickly. If a bank is after someone because that person owes it money, it does not hang about. One of the things that we have done with the CSA is to bring in the private sector to give it far more experience in debt management and collection of money. The CSA was bad at collecting debts.

If in Committee—I make the point generally; it is important that we as a whole House get it right—right hon. and hon. Members have suggestions, or amendments that would make things better, and if there is a gap in the CSA's powers, we will be prepared to look at the matter. The problem with the CSA has been that, from the start, it was swamped with a work load that it could not deal with and a system that was pretty unworkable. It is a great tribute to the CSA chief executive and the staff that, over the past few years, they have made improvements despite the odds, but the key is to work quickly with a simple formula.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Currently, the CSA often says to the parent with care, "If you think that there is fraud, prove it", and asks that parent to produce evidence. Will the system be changed so that, when there is an allegation of fraud and some evidence is produced, the CSA will follow up the matter, find the necessary evidence and ensure that the correct money goes to the child, who is the one who deserves it?

Mr. Darling: All I shall say about fraud—this applies right across the system—is that the CSA and other agencies have to have some prima facie evidence of it. In the Department of Social Security generally, we are also aware that accusations of fraud are often made as part of wider disputes. We therefore have to be careful that the agency has some credible information before it proceeds. My hon. Friend's point is that we must end the days when the agency is given information, but, months later, although it is common ground that it had that information, it has done nothing about it. We are taking action to ensure that such delays are being cut out. In the new system, it will also be very much easier to pursue such cases than it was in the past.

The second important change that we are making is to ensure that people on income support realise the benefit of the maintenance that they receive. Consequently, we have introduced the £10 disregard. It is important not only that people should have an incentive to co-operate with the agency, but that they should realise some benefit for it.

If the mother goes into work, she will not only receive working families tax credit, but keep every penny of it as well as the maintenance disregard. A typical person on working families tax credit should therefore receive about £24 a week extra, plus their £10 disregard, so that they will be considerably better off. It is all part of the Government's twin strategy of not only tackling child poverty, but ensuring that work pays, to encourage people to get into work.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): My right hon. Friend's statement will be welcomed across the country, and by all hon. Members, who constantly deal with the type of cases that he has been describing. Occasionally, however, we introduce disregards that have unforeseen impacts. Will he therefore examine possible interactions between maintenance payments and housing benefit, council tax benefit and all the other benefits?

Mr. Darling: As my hon. Friend knows, we are on the case. The working families tax credit went a long way towards reducing the tapers and disincentives that we inherited. We have already announced that we are examining the way in which housing benefit operates; it is a separate matter in itself, and affects not only maintenance but other benefits and many incentives.

A few moments ago, hon. Members were asking about parents who do not pay. In reply to the hon. Member for Macclesfield, I noted that 30 per cent. of parents on the CSA's books pay nothing at all. I should take this opportunity to outline some of the actions that we are proposing and that I believe will help.

First, when parents wilfully withhold information or lie to the CSA, they will face fines of up to £1,000. That is not a first resort, and they will be given a chance to co-operate. However, we cannot put up with a situation in which people are withholding information and we cannot process their claims. We should remember that, ultimately, the children—not the mother or the father—are the ones who are losing out. We shall therefore take those new powers.

As I said earlier, we shall also take new powers to appoint new specialist inspectors, not only to obtain information from individuals, but—if necessary, when we cannot obtain information voluntarily—to obtain information from employers and the self-employed. As I said, we shall also take powers to gain access to the Inland Revenue.

We can introduce those powers before the establishment of the new system, about which I shall say something shortly. The Government believe that if Parliament gives us those powers, we should take them now to tackle some of the problems that we are all too familiar with.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): Yesterday, I spoke with a constituent who is owed £28,000 by her former husband, who is almost certainly a millionaire, but who has absconded to America. She has been told by the

[Miss Julie Kirkbride]

CSA that she cannot claim that money against any assets—which she believes are still in his name—that he might hold in the United Kingdom. Will the Government consider ensuring that, once they have been established, the debts of those who have left the country are chargeable against assets that they hold in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Darling: If the hon. Lady writes to me with the details of the case, I shall be happy to reply. Clearly, the points of principle that she raised can be explored in Committee, although we would not divulge the name of her constituent. The rules on recovering someone's assets are part of the general law on the recovery of debts. Nothing in the Bill directly impacts on that. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), I am prepared to look at any suggestions that would tighten things up. However, we need to be realistic. Changing the CSA will not resolve all the problems, although I hope that we can address a substantial number of them.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: I suppose so.

Mr. Bercow: I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way in his characteristically gracious manner. Does he recall that I raised previously with the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), in the context of a constituent, the important issue of establishing parentage? I have perused clauses 14 and 61. Can the right hon. Gentleman guarantee that from now on, in every case where an individual is willing to have a DNA test to prove parentage—or more particularly to prove non-parentage—he will be able to do so? It is a matter of the utmost importance to a constituent of mine.

Mr. Darling: I do not see why anyone who is willing to undergo a DNA test should have any difficulty in doing so, as that would put beyond doubt whether or not he was the father of a particular child. Another change in the Bill is that if two people were married to each other when a child was born, the husband is presumed to be the father of that child. That simply extends the provision that applies to Scotland, but for some reason did not apply to the rest of the United Kingdom. Where there is any doubt—

Mr. Bercow: Can such people insist on a DNA test?

Mr. Darling: Yes. The whole point of DNA testing is to put the matter beyond doubt once and for all.

We are taking powers that can be applied earlier to ensure that we can deal with people who insist on being difficult. When someone deliberately delays paying money to their children, we will impose a new penalty of up to 25 per cent. of the money due until they pay. We are also taking powers to make a temporary arrangement when there is difficulty in getting information from people. As a last resort, if someone will not co-operate, the courts will be given the power to imprison them and, at the court's discretion, to remove their driving licences.

The measures that we are proposing will double the number of families on income support getting maintenance. As a result, some 600,000 children in the poorest families will benefit from maintenance for the first time.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Will the powers in relation to establishing parentage be used by the CSA even if there is no money to be collected? One obvious concern is to make it quite clear for future planning who the two parents responsible are, but the CSA seems to be saying that if there is no likelihood of gaining money from the suspected father, it is not interested in making the case a priority.

Mr. Darling: There will be money to collect unless the father is a student or a prisoner. Under the new system, everyone has to pay something to their children, so it will be worthwhile on a point of principle for the CSA to pursue these people.

Let me say a brief word about timing, which is a matter of concern to all hon. Members. We all agree that the need for reform is urgent. The CSA is already making progress within the constraints of the present system, but there is also widespread agreement across the House that we do not want to repeat the mistakes that were made in the 1990s. When the CSA was set up, it took on the entire case load and collapsed under the weight. To do that again would be absolutely disastrous. It is worth bearing in mind that the CSA has nearly 1 million cases on its books and deals with some 400,000 new cases a year. We are determined not to introduce the reforms before everything is in place. It is a large task. It is not just about new legislation but involves new information technology and significant changes to the way in which the agency works.

The agency's case load increased by some 80 per cent. over the past few years, so I want to ensure that we get the reforms right. I want them in place as quickly as possible, but no one would want us to introduce the new system if we were not satisfied that it would work from the start. If we did, we would revisit all the problems that arose in the past.

In the meantime, we have invested an additional £28 million in the system. As I said, we brought in the private sector to help to improve debt recovery, we are making more use of the telephone, the CSA is open longer, including at the weekends and in the evenings, and staff will meet people in the privacy of their own homes. We are now providing a nationwide framework of nearly 500 staff who can see people in face-to-face interviews. Shortly, the agency will also introduce statements that set out what has been paid and what is still due, which many people will find useful—not least hon. Members.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): One of the more chilling aspects of the explanatory notes to the Bill is the information that the CSA will shortly have a new computer system. I sat on the Public Accounts Committee long enough to understand that the installation of new computer systems in Departments has been an almost unmitigated disaster. May we have the Secretary of State's absolute assurance that he will ensure that the new computer system improves matters rather than making them worse?

Mr. Darling: I certainly did not regard the information that we will have a new computer system as chilling, because I was more optimistic about it. Having been Secretary of State for Social Security for some 18 months, I assure the hon. Gentleman that I regard computers in much the same way as he does. Given the experience of Government procurement of computers, in my Department and elsewhere, I am determined that we should replace the entire Department computing system—it is antiquated and, in the middle of the next decade, spare parts for it will no longer be available—in manageable bits and so that one part of the system does not depend on another part to work. The problem with the plans that we inherited was that if one part of the system collapsed, it would bring down the rest. Such attitudes led to all the problems with NIRS2 and the benefit payment card.

We are negotiating with EDS and the consortium that it leads to procure a new computer system for the CSA. We have spent some time doing so, because we want to ensure that the contract is right. It is due to be delivered towards the end of 2001, but I want to ensure that it actually works before we switch it on and transfer the new cases, let alone the old ones, to it. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) can take it from me that I have had enough experience of NIRS2 and the failed benefit payment card to be very wary of the procurement of computers.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): My predecessor as Member for Bury, North was the Minister in the former regime who was responsible for implementing the CSA, so I have followed the issue carefully over the past three or four years. Under the new system, will my right hon. Friend be able to ensure that people who approach the CSA are given a named official who will progress their cases? We all know of the terrible bureaucracy that dogged the agency under the old regime, but one of the most frequent complaints from constituents is that they never know to whom they are talking. Can a named official be guaranteed under the new system? It is not a point that can be easily pursued through primary legislation, but I hope that he can ensure that the CSA will give the highest priority to projecting a human face to those who contact them. Many improvements have been made in the past two years, but there is still some way to go.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend makes a good point and we wish to encourage such an approach now, as well as in the future. It is much better for everyone concerned if people can speak to someone who knows their case and they do not have to go over old ground time and again. When we have the new computer system, it will be much easier because staff will be able to call up on screen everything that they need to know about an individual. Anyone who has ever inspected bank or building society computer systems will know how a good system can work. Everything about a customer is on the screen and it is much easier to give advice. If a member of staff goes on holiday, his or her replacement knows to whom the caller spoke the previous week, and what the position is with the case. I do not want to be too optimistic about the time scale, but we are trying to start the process now, even within the constraints of the present system.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Darling: Yes, but then I must make some progress. I am conscious that Madam Speaker is frowning even now. This is the last intervention that I shall take for 15 minutes.

Mr. Boswell: I am very grateful, but my question follows on from the previous one. Will the right hon. Gentleman bear in mind the importance of ensuring that the same named official deals with both sides of a particular case? Many hon. Members will be familiar with instances when, although both parties live in the same constituency, the CSA appears not to have integrated its consideration of the circumstances of the case. The result is that two CSA officials do not talk to each other about the same information.

Mr. Darling: If it is possible to do what the hon. Gentleman suggests, I shall, and his proposal is certainly worth considering.

Before I leave the child support system, I reiterate the general point that I think that this is the last chance for the CSA. It is important that we get this matter right, and so the Government will listen to suggestions, in Committee and on Report, from hon. Members in all parties. I do not know the Conservative party's attitude to this part of the Bill, but no doubt I shall find out. However, if improvements can be made to the Bill or to procedures, we are open to considering them.

I turn now to community punishments, and to the state second pension. I shall deal first with community punishments, which are covered in part III.

The first, brief, point to be made is that there is no unconditional right to benefit. Rights are matched by responsibilities. At present, one in five offenders given community sentences is brought before the courts for failing to comply with the requirements of the sentence. We simply cannot allow that to continue, as those people break their side of the bargain but still claim benefits. I do not believe it right that a community punishment should be regarded as a one-way bet, in which people can do what they want while expecting everyone else to pay for their benefit.

We propose that benefit will be either withdrawn or reduced for offenders referred back to court by the probation service for breaching their community sentences. People will be told about what will happen, and will be able to remedy the difficulty immediately, simply by complying with the probation order. The remedy will lie in the hands of offenders: those who want their benefits restored will have to do no more than comply with the conditions imposed by the courts.

The Bill provides the means to implement such a system. We shall start by piloting it in a small number of areas, and we will evaluate the pilot schemes before coming to firm conclusions. However, I believe that the measure will send the clear message to offenders that benefits bring obligations that they must meet.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): In those pilot exercises, will tests be applied to determine how the removal of benefits affects the poverty faced by the people involved? Also, should not there be ways to discover whether removing benefits encourages rehabilitation, or whether it leads to reoffending because people's circumstances have been made more difficult?

Mr. Darling: There are provisions for hardship, but the remedy in cases such as the hon. Gentleman described lies

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in the hands of the person who breaks a probation order. People are not required to live in poverty or to lose their benefit. They are required only to do what the court tells them to do. If they are not willing to do that, they can have no cause for complaint.

I turn now to what I regard as an extremely important part of the Bill, the second stage of the reform of pensions. Part II provides for the reform of SERPS and its replacement with the state second pension.

The reforms being put in place, together with those in the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999, will put pensions on a sound, sustainable and affordable footing for the future. Our plans have been welcomed almost universally.

If we did nothing, by 2050, one person in three would risk depending on means-tested benefits in retirement. Under the pension system that we inherited, nearly a third of people working were headed for retirement on benefits. We believe that everyone who can save, should save. That is why we have legislated for stakeholder pensions, which will help the 5 million people unable to get an occupational scheme to get a funded pension. Stakeholder pensions are on track for delivery from April next year.

Today, we are going further. We are helping 4.5 million low-paid people, 6 million moderate earners, 2 million carers and 2 million disabled people with broken work records by reforming SERPS and making it better through the introduction of the state second pension. The current system—SERPS—was designed to supplement the basic state pension, but it does not do enough for the low paid, and it does nothing for many carers or disabled people with broken work records.

SERPS is earnings-related—so, by definition, if people do not earn very much, they do not contribute very much, and do not get very much back when they retire. We are determined to improve SERPS, and the state second pension will, in some cases, triple the amount of additional pension to which low earners will be entitled. For example, under SERPS, someone earning £6,000 a year—after a lifetime of employment—gets £14 a week on top of their basic state pension. Under the state second pension, that sum will rise to £54 a week. That is £40 extra for that low earner.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: No one—not even the Liberals—can say that that is not a substantial improvement on the present situation.

Mr. Webb: Will the Secretary of State confirm that the statement he has just made will not be true before 2047?

Mr. Darling: No. Over the past few months, the hon. Gentleman has been complaining about the state second pension.

Mr. Bercow: Answer the question.

Mr. Darling: I was answering—I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman might be interested.

The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) keeps saying that the state second pension will take a long time to mature, and he is right to the extent that pensions, by their very nature, take some years to build up. However, because of the way in which the state second pension is structured, people will begin to see improvements from very shortly after it is introduced—probably in 2002. Many people will see a substantial difference in the amount of pension they will receive as a result of the changes that we are making.

For example, a couple, one of whom is on low earnings, while the other spends half their time caring, will, as a result of our changes, get £30 more because of the operation of the state second pension. That is by 2025. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] I make no apology for that. For heaven's sake—no wonder the Tories mis-sold pensions. What sort of pension can someone take out where they get a vast increase in money the day after they take it out?

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The right hon. Gentleman said 2002.

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman, who spends a great deal of time grunting and snorting from the Opposition Front Bench, has misheard me. I said that the state second pension will start to be introduced from 2002. I went on to say that it will take time for people to see the full benefit of the state second pension. The point I was making to the hon. Member for Northavon was that even in 25 years' time—not long in pension planning terms—the couple I described will be £30 a week better off than they would otherwise have been if we did not reform SERPS.

I believe that the changes in the state second pension will greatly increase the amount of money going, for example, to someone on £6,000 a year, who will be £40 a week better off. However, even someone on £15,000 a year will be £17 a week better off, and it will take 14 years before their income falls to the level of the minimum income guarantee. Any fair-minded person looking at the system will see that the state second pension and the reforms that we are making to SERPS are infinitely better than the present system because they allow people on low earnings, carers and disabled people to build up substantial pensions. That would not otherwise be the case.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Is not the problem that the state second pension will be extremely complex? My right hon. Friend says that it was been welcomed, but an analysis of responses—particularly from the pensions industry—shows that many respondents recoiled in horror at the complexity of the scheme. As a result of what the Tories did to the basic state pension, people have lost out by £27 a week. By introducing the state second pension, we are only replacing what was a good basic state pension. Would not it have been simpler to increase the basic state pension?

Mr. Darling: If I were my hon. Friend, I would be very careful about taking at face value what some respondents said about the state second pension. The complaint of many of them is that it exists at all. If there were no enhanced state earnings-related pension—the state second pension—people would be better off in an occupational pension scheme because otherwise they would receive very little.

The Tories make the same complaint. They do not like the state second pension; their answer to its complexity is not to have such a scheme at all, leaving SERPS to give people precious little. In fact, they are not terribly keen on SERPS either. Their proposal was to privatise the entire pensions system at a cost of some £150 billion. It is not surprising that, three years after they announced that proposal, they have still to find any serious commentator prepared to buy it.

I believe that the system that we are introducing is not complex. It recognises that people earning less than about £9,500 a year will never earn enough to go into a funded pension on their own. They might do better in a company scheme, with the company contributing as well. We are determined to ensure that the state gives them far more than they would otherwise get.

Under our proposals, someone on £6,000 a year would be £40 a week better off because of the rebalancing of SERPS under the new state second pension. I should have thought that anyone—especially my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), considering where she stands in our party—would have considered that particular piece of redistribution a good thing, to be supported rather than criticised.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Darling: No, I have not finished my point yet.

Although a number of respondents were concerned about the existence of the state second pension, the industry as a whole welcomes the fact that the state second pension will help not only low earners but moderate earners because they will have an enhanced rebate that they can take into their occupational pension, their stakeholder pension or, in some cases, a personal private pension.

Mr. Bruce: On advance corporation tax and the £5 billion that is being taken away from pension schemes, how does that compare with what the Government claim to be putting into the second pension? I am sure that a balancing act has been done somewhere in the Treasury or the Department of Social Security to work out how much extra the Government are getting out of future pensioners, rather than providing extra for them.

Mr. Darling: I wondered whether any Tory would be daft enough to raise that question today. Yesterday, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) made a great song and dance, with much synthetic anger, about the Government's changes to the ACT system. Let me give him an answer. As I was perusing the reviews for our pension changes announced yesterday, my eye was caught by an article in the *Financial Times* headed

"Pension funds show second best results in 10 years."

He said yesterday that our changes to ACT had denuded pension funds of all their money. Yet the article quoted the company that compiled the figures as saying:

"This was an incredible year, with an end-result beyond most people's expectations."

So much for all the accusations that we were damaging pension funds—they have had a very good year.

As I said yesterday, I do not want to go into too much detail on ACT. The changes simplify the corporation tax system. We now have the lowest corporation tax this country has ever seen—something the Tories could never achieve. We have a stable economic background and a healthy economy, which is helping pension funds and pensioners. To cap it all, I bet that the Tories have no intention of going back to the old system, so I discount all their synthetic anger.

The state second pension gives disabled people and carers a pension that they would not otherwise get. The pensions proposals that we announced last year, together with the proposals in the Bill, mean that all who can save now have the opportunity to do so. The changes that we are making as a result of the state second pension will help some 14 million people. That is a substantial amendment.

Finally, the Bill provides additional powers to deal with suspected fraud. We are giving inspectors substantial powers that they do not have at present. We are also continuing to align tax and national insurance contributions with new measures to extend national insurance contributions to benefits in kind.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): I have listened carefully to the Secretary of State's speech. Could he help the House by telling us to what extent the Bill increases or decreases overall public spending? Will he tell us the amount? It is not clear whether the Treasury will be better or worse off as a consequence of the Bill.

Mr. Darling: On the state second pension, the answer is that the Bill increases expenditure by about £5 billion. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] It is all in the financial memorandum. If hon. Members care to read that document, they will find out what the position is.

The Bill contains a radical package of measures to build a welfare state fit for the needs of the 21st century. It will be a welfare state founded on fairness and opportunity—two concepts that Opposition Members would not begin to understand. The measure will be fair for those who meet their responsibilities, but will be tougher on those who are not prepared to face up to their responsibilities. It links the right to benefit with the responsibility to comply with obligations. It is fairer for low-paid people, for carers and for disabled people with broken work records. It will help more than 14 million people on pensions.

We are reforming the Child Support Agency; something that is long overdue and that it falls to a Labour Government to deliver. We are making better pension provision at present and in the future—something that only a Labour Government can do. We are making changes to the benefit system so that it is far tighter and far more affordable, and will be far more sustainable in the future.

We are building a welfare state that will be supported. Step by step, we are delivering: we are ending child poverty; we are providing opportunity and we are building a fair society. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.31 pm

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House notes that the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill will make the social security system yet more complicated; regrets that the child support formula will reduce the

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entitlement to child maintenance of many parents with care; believes that the transitional period risks causing further resentment amongst people caught between two child support regimes; deplores the complexity of the Government's proposals for the state second pension; believes that the lower earnings threshold will act as a barrier to people moving into private provision; regrets that important features of the state second pension are being left for later regulation; and accordingly declines to give the Bill a Second Reading because it represents a missed opportunity on the part of the Government to reform social security."

I begin with the same part of the Bill to which the Secretary of State referred—child support. I confirm that we agree with him on the fundamental principles of reform; indeed, they go back to our Child Support Acts 1991 and 1995. We believe that biological parents have an inescapable financial obligation to the children whom they bring into the world. Furthermore, unlike the Liberal Democrats, we believe that we cannot simply go back to the courts—on that we are with the Government. We need an effective administrative system in order to secure the financial support that all parents should give to their children. That was common ground when we introduced the original legislation, and it remains so.

The Opposition also accept the need for reform. Every Member is aware—not least from our constituency surgeries—that the Child Support Agency is not working. We accept that the formula is too complicated and that more emphasis should be placed on enforcement. That is common ground and we support the Government's proposals on those matters.

However, we have serious concerns about how the Government's proposals will work in practice. In that regard, I learned much from the work of the Select Committee on Social Security. I greatly appreciate its work. The Committee undertook a thorough investigation of this subject last year. The Opposition think that it is wrong that, under the Government's proposals, no account will be taken of the income of the parent with care. For example, the parent with care—often, but not necessarily, a woman—may remarry. He or she might then be in favourable financial circumstances, perhaps much more favourable than those of their ex-spouse, and there will be widespread resentment if the system fails to take into account the new income of the parent with care. We shall hear of such cases in all our surgeries; people will regard that as unacceptable and contrary to natural justice.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am a little confused. Is the hon. Gentleman really saying that, although it is very important that one should pay for one's own children, if, for any reason, one's ex-partner is able to get money from a wholly different source, that automatically absolves one of any responsibility for continuing to pay for one's children at the existing rate? If that is what the hon. Gentleman is saying, it seems to be a somewhat complex—even unacceptable—set of mores.

Mr. Willetts: I am not saying that that should be automatic, but that—as the Select Committee said—if the parent with care remarries and finds herself or himself with an affluent new spouse, there will come a point when it is simply unacceptable to fail to take those new financial circumstances into account. Labour Members will find that their constituents will come to their surgeries to make that very point.

Mr. Connarty: Is not the hon. Gentleman saying that he is going to play this issue for politics and not the moral right of the child?

Mr. Willetts: I am talking about what seems to me to be a clear and simple principle. The hon. Gentleman will find that his constituents and others throughout the country are simply unable to understand why no account whatsoever should be taken of the financial circumstances of the parent with care if he or she remarries.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willetts: I am sorry, but I would like to make a second point about the formula. I do not intend to take quite as long as the Secretary of State.

We also oppose the fact that, at the moment, there is no upper limit on the liability of the non-resident parent. Again, as the non-resident parent's income rises—perhaps that is long after the relationship with the other parent of the child has broken up—there must come a point when one cannot indefinitely extract 20 or 25 per cent. of the income of the non-resident parent. We need to have an upper limit somewhere in the system.

Trying to take account of the income of the parent with care and setting an upper limit on the liability of the non-resident parent would bring our system of child support much more into line with the common-sense instincts of the average constituent whom we are trying to represent. I will now give way to the hon. Lady.

Mrs. Humble: As a member of the Select Committee, I have tried to refresh my memory about some of our recommendations. On the point about the income and resources of the parent with care, I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that the recommendations of the Select Committee were to do with the earnings of the parent with care. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will reconsider his remarks about remarriage and income from other sources.

Mr. Willetts: No. This is an important matter, which we will find is one of the sticking points that we shall all face in our surgeries if these proposals, as currently formulated, are passed into law.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willetts: Yes, but very briefly because I want to move on to other points about child support.

Mr. Dismore: The hon. Gentleman seems to want to pick and choose between the recommendations of the Select Committee, of which I am also a member. It accepted the Government's proposal that there should not be a limit on the income of wealthier parents because we believe that children have the right to share in the income of wealthy parents and share their standard of living.

Mr. Willetts: The hon. Gentleman is a member of the Select Committee and I am not. However, from my

recollection, a proposal in the original draft was changed after a vote of five votes to two. I agree with the two members of the Select Committee who thought that such income should be taken into account. I do not accept everything that the Committee said, but I think that its report is valuable and that some of its proposals should be reflected in the Bill. I regret the fact that they are not.

I shall move on to another feature of the Bill—something that loomed very large when the Secretary of State was spinning and briefing on his proposals, but which he strangely passed over today. I refer, of course, to the tough new penalty, which we were told about several months ago, of taking away people's driving licences if they fell into bad odour with the Child Support Agency. We were told at the time that that was an example of a Government getting tough with people who did not comply with the Child Support Agency. The Government managed to get a lot of coverage for its tough new approach of taking away driving licences. There was even a suggestion at one stage that they would take away passports as well, but they allowed the Passport Agency to do that through its own devices.

Now what do we find? This tough new measure is not an extra penalty, it is an alternative to a jail sentence. It is not, in other words, a toughening of the regime at all. It is a bold new initiative in which the Government are saying, "If you don't fancy going to jail, you can always hand in your driving licence instead."

That is a bizarre new approach to enforcing benefit penalties, and I should be interested to know whether the Secretary of State believes that it will have wide application. If so, he has certainly created an incentive for people to try to get a driving licence, if they have not already done so, because they can trade it in against the alternative punishment of a custodial sentence. That measure is exactly the opposite of the spin that the Secretary of State put on it months ago: it is not a toughening of the regime, but a weakening of it.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): That is trivial.

Mr. Willetts: The hon. Gentleman says that it is trivial, but the Government's briefing on these proposals focused on the driving licence measure. It was about all that they could say about the proposals. Inches and inches of newspaper comment focused entirely on that bold new approach—and we now discover that it is not an extra penalty but an alternative to a custodial sentence, as the Bill makes clear.

The transitional phase will be one of the biggest single problems that we shall face if and when the legislation is implemented. It will be very difficult to run two systems and it will be very difficult to maintain any legitimacy in the current arrangements if, at the same time, a new and more simple formula is being passed into law by the House. The Secretary of State did not properly address the problem of how he believes that he will be able to carry on collecting child support under the old formula while at the same time introducing the new system. He will be trying to run both systems in parallel, and that is where his problems will arise.

We want to hear from the Secretary of State today—he gave no figures on this in his lengthy speech—whether he thinks that he will have to write off a large amount of the debts accruing under the old formula, and how he seriously expects us to explain to our constituents that they still have substantial financial obligations under the old formula, long after the House has passed a new formula into law. It will be very difficult to explain to people in new cases in the coming year that even they will be treated under the old formula. As we all know, there is a serious enough crisis of legitimacy in child support at the moment. Trying to run two systems in parallel will make an already difficult problem far worse.

Mr. Coaker: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously saying that there should be a big bang and that everything should change at once? Is he seriously suggesting that there should be no transitional phase? If there were not, we would experience again the problems that occurred six or seven years ago when the CSA was established. Is not it far better to accept the suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that, despite the difficulties, we should have a transitional phase because without it we will simply recreate the chaos of the past?'

Mr. Willetts: I accept that we will need a transitional phase, but I want to hear from the Secretary of State, who will be responsible for running both systems during that phase, how in practice he expects to collect child support under the old formula and what scope there is for trying to introduce the new formula more rapidly, at least for new cases.

The hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) will find it very difficult to explain to people who come to his surgery with a new child support case that despite everything that they have read in the newspapers about the new formula coming into force, they will still be judged under the old formula. That is a legitimate question for the Opposition to raise because it is a problem that hon. Members on both sides of the House will have to face. That is why we say that the new formula for new cases needs to come into force as quickly as possible.

Ministers have not yet revealed as much as we need to know about the regulations that will enforce the detail of many of the proposals. We are not even sure what the measure of income will be. That is not in the Bill. There is very little detail in the Bill and only a little more in the White Paper. We do not know, for example, how so-called unearned income—perhaps it is better to call it income from savings and investments—will be treated. It appears that it will be completely ignored in the new formula. If it is ignored, there will be many cases—we used to call them departures but they will now be called variations—where people will say, "It is unfair. A substantial income from investment and savings will not be taken account of in the formula. We want an individual investigation to ascertain how this will affect us."

The proposed legislation fails to provide the necessary information to enable the House to reach a view on how the new systems will work. Given the admitted problems of child support over many years, it is our experience that above all we need clarity. Unfortunately, the Bill does not bring with it the clarity and information that the House is entitled to expect if it is to reach a full view on the Government's proposals.

It is a great pity that the Government have not responded to the Select Committee's proposal of a Special Standing Committee. It would have been helpful if Ministers had accepted the suggestion of a scrutiny role

[Mr. Willetts]

for the Social Security Advisory Committee. I speak as a former member of that committee. The Secretary of State's rather cavalier dismissal of a possible role for the SSAC in his response to the Select Committee's report was mistaken. There must be careful scrutiny of the detailed regulations that will implement the meat that is lacking in the Bill, and we are not persuaded that the Government are offering us the information that will be necessary for that scrutiny. We are not persuaded that there will be sufficient scope for scrutinising and debating the regulations. We have substantial concerns about the way in which the Government are going forward on child support reform, but we accept that the current system cannot be allowed to continue in its current form.

As for a second state pension if the child support measures in the Bill are an example of a problem that must be tackled, the second state pension is an example of the Government creating entirely unnecessary muddle and confusion. It is a gratuitous set of measures which, in so far as it takes welfare in any direction, takes it in the wrong direction. The second state pension is just more paper promises. We have more promises of state pensions being financed from the generality of taxpayers and further discouragement to funded pension provision, which we believe in and want to encourage.

We want to encourage people to save for themselves. Once again, the Labour party is looking to the state as a source of alternative pension provision. I remind Ministers of the pledge that appeared in the Labour party's manifesto, on which every Labour Member was elected when they fought the 1997 general election. It stated:

"Labour will retain Serps as an option for those who wish to remain within it."

The Bill represents a failure to adhere to a simple pledge in Labour's manifesto to retain SERPS.

The Secretary of State says, "Our proposal is even better than SERPS." The right hon. Gentleman is trying to get the best of all possible worlds. He says, "We may be abolishing SERPS, but we are introducing something that is even better." One of the reasons for the extraordinary complexity of the proposals that he has put before the House is that he is trying to introduce a new system while replicating the distribution of benefits under the old regime. He is trying to ensure that no one will be worse off than he or she would have been under SERPS, while claiming that he is introducing a bold new system. One is reminded of the old child support formula. The sole purpose of the extremely complicated formula that is before us is to enable the right hon. Gentleman to try to do the job that the previous SERPS regime was doing.

We have an example of the point at which welfare reform disappears in its own ingenuity. The only purpose of the complicated formulae is to try to replicate the same distribution of benefits under SERPS, as though the Secretary of State had not decided to abolish it. The right hon. Gentleman has not succeeded. Despite all his claims that no one will be worse off under the new system, there will be a significant group of losers. I refer to the 150,000 people who have earnings from employment and from self-employment. Under SERPS, their earnings from self-employment were taken into account, but the Bill contains no provision to ensure that any earnings from self-employment are taken into account. Therefore, contrary to the Secretary of State's assurances, there will be a significant group of losers—people who do worse under his formula than they would have done under SERPS.

In his desperate attempt to protect the same distribution of benefit as would have occurred under SERPS, the Secretary of State has set up a complicated structure with, for example, different rates of accrual of benefit in different earnings bands. I agree with the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) that it will take 25 or 50 years to deliver even a tiny increase in pension entitlements—that is, paper pension entitlements, not backed by a real fund. It will be a sight worth seeing when Labour Members in their surgeries, facing pensioners complaining that they are to receive only a 75p increase in their basic pension in the coming year, explain that those pensioners should not worry because they will get an extra £1.50 in 2025.

The proposed system delivers not jam tomorrow, but jam in the distant future. The Government have failed to understand that people want genuine funded provision for their future, not vague paper promises that in 2025 or 2050 they will have a theoretical paper pension that is worth £1.50, £2.50 or £3.00—if they are lucky—more than they would have had under SERPS. At the same time as those tiny and distant paper promises are delivered, the means-testing of current pensioners continues apace with the spread of the minimum income guarantee, which imposes yet another penalty on pensioners with modest incomes who saved for their retirement. Hundreds of thousands of pensioners find themselves trapped in a means test that results in their efforts to save not being rewarded.

The provisions to establish the second state pension contain one of the most outrageous examples of apartheid in pensions provision that the House has seen for a long time: an explicit set of regulations creating entirely different pensions regimes for people in different earnings categories. There is to be a three-class model of pensions, with one regime for low earners, one for moderate earners and one for high earners—with nice high barriers to keep the different groups apart. That is not a Conservative vision of pensions provision; we believe that there should be funded pension provision for everyone. There should not be a £9,500 barrier, with sheep on one side and goats on the other. That is how tickets for the millennium dome should be allocated, not the way in which pensions provision in this country should develop.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that people in different earnings bands have different pension requirements and opportunities, and that the responsible section of the insurance industry, not the cowboys, accepts that people earning £9,500 or less should not be in a personal pension scheme?

Mr. Willetts: The point is that we believe in a mobile society, in which people earning less than £9,500 one year can have legitimate hopes that their earnings will be well above that the next. The system the Government propose has high barriers that will trap people in the second state pension and make it extremely difficult for them to move

into funded provision. The problem is that the system lacks the flexibility needed to accommodate people's mobility.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): How do the Conservatives suggest that those who throughout their working lives have caring responsibilities or receive low pay—the Conservatives oppose the national minimum wage, which would increase pay levels—can be assured of receiving good funded pensions that will keep them in their old age?

Mr. Willetts: We believe that it is possible to encourage many more people than currently do so to take out funded pensions. The primary reason we oppose the Government's proposals is that, at the same time as quite gratuitously messing around with SERPS, they are creating complexity and additional burdens that will deter those who want to take out funded pension provision.

Contrary to what the Secretary of State said in his speech, that has been the widespread reaction of representatives of funded pensions across the country. The National Association of Pension Funds complains:

"Contracting-out procedures are already excessively complex. The two-stage introduction of the S2P"—

the second state pension—

"will add considerably to the complexity. Neither of the alternatives proposed seem likely to encourage employers to set up or continue to support"—

that is important—

"contracted-out pension schemes."

The National Association of Pension Funds is saying that existing contracted-out pension schemes will become more onerous for employers to operate, because of the provisions introduced by the Government in the Bill and in previous legislation. There is a complacent assumption among Labour Members that the Government can continue to rely on the success of funded pensions as in our years in office. They assume that there will be an ever-wider spread of occupational pension provision. If they carry on in the way that they are going, that marvellous development over the past 20 years will go into reverse, and it will be the fault of Ministers.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Is not the hon. Gentleman missing the point? What realistic prospect can there be of someone who has been a carer for 20 years getting private pension provision? Does not the Bill give something to someone who has no hope of anything in the current circumstances?

Mr. Willetts: As the hon. Lady knows, there was already home responsibility protection under the basic state pension, and we also intended to introduce wider home responsibility protection at the same time as other changes to SERPS. That would have addressed the issue that concerns the hon. Lady.

Mr. Boswell: Has my hon. Friend also considered the administrative aspects of a structure that is set up in national insurance terms, whereby earnings are assessed on a weekly basis and contributions calculated appropriately, and the proposed superimposition of annual limits, which may well create further anomalies and turbulence within the system?

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point; indeed, I was about to deal with it. The interaction of the provisions with the national insurance system is one of the important aspects that the Government have so far failed to address.

Mr. Bercow: In the light of the chutzpah of the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) in talking about people with caring responsibilities, does my hon. Friend agree that it would be extremely wise to abolish the age restriction of 65 for claimants of invalid care allowance and the carers premium, thereby assisting 55,000 of the poorest carers throughout the land?

Mr. Willetts: My hon. Friend is right. That policy proposal, which was put forward by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, would do far more to deal with a practical problem than all the empty paper promises contained in an unnecessarily complicated set of proposals.

The Secretary of State could have achieved his objectives—his own, not ours—simply by making relatively technical adjustments to SERPS. Instead of going down the straightforward route, rescinding some of our changes to SERPS and changing some of the factors whereby future pension entitlement was attained, which would have been a better way of meeting his own objectives, he proudly announces that he is abolishing SERPs, introducing something completely different in its place, and imposing a new set of administrative burdens and complexities on private pension providers, thereby threatening the funded pension arrangements that are one of this country's great economic successes.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the pension system that his Government left in 1997 meant that more than two thirds of women workers earning less than £10,000 a year had no second pension provision whatever? If he proposes to get those women to enter a funded pension system in the private sector, what sort of structure of coercion or incentives will be necessary to achieve that?

Mr. Willetts: I believe that it would be possible to encourage far more funded pension provision through a suitable contracting-out regime. One of our objections to the proposals is that the contracting-out regime will become so complicated that it will impose a significant extra burden on employers who run funded schemes. Labour Members are far too complacent about the implications of the proposals for existing and new funded pension arrangements. They will regret the way in which they have ignored significant objections, not only from the National Association of Pension Funds, but from others. I could quote many other pensions experts who say that the Bill's proposals for a second state pension will impose unacceptable burdens on them. That is one way in which the proposals will threaten the funded pension provision that Conservative Members want to encourage.

I want briefly to make a point about NIRS2, which lay behind the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell). The Secretary of State had the good grace to speak with some humility about computer problems. However, given the Government's record of managing computer problems—they are their own millennium bug—it is not feasible that the system will be ready in the time scale that the Secretary of State outlined.

[Mr. Willetts]

It is ludicrous to claim that people who run pensions will face tough new proposals on winding up pensions when their biggest problem is their inability to get accurate information from NIRS2. It is simply not good enough to pass legislation that imposes new burdens on them when NIRS2 problems remain far from resolved despite Ministers' assurances.

I shall refer briefly to other measures in the Bill, because some of them merit careful scrutiny. We have heard a little from the right hon. Gentleman about loss of benefit for breach of a community order. Conservative Members believe that there should be tougher benefit sanctions to ensure the integrity of the social security system. We are always keen to examine ways in which benefit sanctions can be made more effective. However, when we considered proposals such as those in the Bill, we were told that we could not get away with them and that they would not be legally watertight.

Let us consider the idea of imposing a similar community order on two offenders, one of whom has earnings and one of whom is on benefit. Both fail to meet the terms of the order and are thus in breach of it. The Bill proposes that the offender who receives benefit should receive an extra punishment—withdrawal of benefit—which will not be imposed on the offender with earnings. That may sound attractive, or be one of the gimmicks that the Secretary of State's spin doctors devise to make him sound tough, but I doubt whether he will get the provision through the courts.

I shall be interested to read the legal advice on which the right hon. Gentleman bases his claim that the provisions will be compatible with the obligations that the Government assumed when they incorporated the European convention on human rights into British law. I do not believe that he will succeed in implementing the proposal, because it will face significant problems in the courts. It is a gimmick like curfews, which the Home Secretary introduced. Such gimmicks are spun to get Ministers on to the front pages, but they fail to make an impact in the real world. They are the empty pledges and claims for which the Government have become notorious.

I shall have a modest bet with the Secretary of State that he will be unable to take away benefits from people who breach community orders any more than the Home Secretary is able to impose curfews on people who are responsible for anti-social behaviour. I look forward to the day when he is hauled before the courts and told that he simply cannot get away with it.

Mr. Coaker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Willetts: No, because I want to conclude, and I said that I would not speak for as long as the Secretary of State.

Finally, we need a little more information about the national insurance contributions on benefits in kind. They are a new stealth tax, raising no less than £225 million. One of the benefits in kind under attack in the Bill—how ironic, in a week when the national health service is once more in crisis—is private health insurance. People take a burden off the health service by using private health cover, but that will be hit by national insurance contributions for the first time. I suppose we should be relieved that we are told that at least stress counselling will not, as a benefit, be subject to national insurance contributions, so there are small mercies.

Virtually all benefits in kind will be subject to national insurance contributions, which will put a significant extra burden on employers and be a significant extra cost for employees. Those P11D forms will become even more complicated to fill in. The Government's approach is quite simple: if it is taxable it is NICable, and they are nicking another £225 million through that provision.

The right hon. Gentleman said, "I don't want to be remembered as another Secretary of State who tinkered with the system." The fact is that the Bill does just tinker with the system; it is not serious welfare reform. Most of that tinkering is unnecessary and many of the proposals, particularly on pensions, are actively damaging. That is why we invite the House to vote for our reasoned amendment.

5.6 pm

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): I am a veteran, or perhaps a casualty, of—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I should perhaps remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that there is a 15-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

Mr. Rooney: I am a veteran, or perhaps a casualty, of previous Child Support Agency legislation, having served on each of the Committees considering child support Bills, and I was reminded of Alice in Wonderland when the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), was speaking. He has obviously learned nothing from the operation of that legislation over the past six or seven years. I am grateful that amendments have been tabled by the Opposition and the Liberal party because I would have been worried and suspicious if there had been as much agreement on the Bill as there was on the Child Support Act 1991. That legislation was widely welcomed in principle but, sadly, the detail was very much neglected. We can learn a lesson from that: when complex algebraic formulas are included in a Bill, and extensive and detailed regulations are promised, it is helpful if hon. Members see what those formulas really mean during their consideration of that Bill.

This may be rare from a Labour Member, but I should like to praise the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) because, when the Jobseekers Act 1995 was in Committee—she was the Minister responsible for it—she tabled draft regulations and provided specimen forms that were to be used to implement it. Perhaps my right hon. Friends might consider that: where the Bill promises regulations, draft regulations should be put before the Committee so that it understands exactly what is being implemented. Nevertheless, the Government should be congratulated on the widespread and genuine consultation that took place via the Green Paper and the White Paper, and also because comments made in that consultation have been reflected in the Bill. I am also grateful that the views of Members of Parliament have been taken into account in arriving at the legislation, including some opinions—unbelievably—that were expressed from those on the Opposition Benches.

In taking the legislation forward, we need to be careful that we do not fall into the trap that was generated by a significant media campaign about the victims being the absent parents. For too long, publicity in both the House and the media focused on the problems experienced by absent parents in meeting their responsibilities. Little was said in support of the real victims—children who were receiving no maintenance. The paralysing effects of the chaos and inertia that featured in the early years of the CSA built a platform for the media campaign; moreover, the changes made in 1993 and 1995 were made entirely for the benefit of absent parents. Not one legislative change was made with the children in mind.

Notwithstanding what was said by the hon. Member for Havant, the advantage that this Bill has over earlier legislation lies in its transparency, and in the simplicity of the formula that it proposes. In future, no one will have an excuse for claiming that they did not understand what was required of them, or the amount that they had to pay. Under the current system, 70 per cent. of children receive no maintenance at all, and there are millions of pounds of uncollected and probably uncollectable arrears—money that should be supporting children, usually the poorest.

Owing to the inadequacy of the computers, no one can say with certainty at any given time what the position is in any given case. Those who contact the CSA's regional offices usually find that they are speaking to someone whose brain is befuddled, who is probably living in the dark ages, knowing nothing of what goes on in the real world, and who can answer no Member of Parliament or member of the public with conviction.

The present system generates mountains of paper. The agency may issue as many as seven communications on the same day, running to six or seven pages, each telling a different story and featuring incredible calculations that bear no relation to people's circumstances. The simplicity of the proposed 15, 20, or 25 per cent. formula will restore the agency's credibility, which is the first thing that is needed if parents are to have a genuine desire to co-operate with it. It is no wonder that so few wish to do so now: they rightly feel that the agency lies on the road to ruin and destruction, and that there is nothing in it for them.

The advantages of the Bill are the simplicity and transparency of the proposed formula, the speed of assessment and the introduction for the first time of the maintenance disregard for those on income support. At last we shall have a child support Act, rather than a Treasury support Act. I welcome the disregard of maintenance in the calculation of working families tax credit, which will make a huge contribution to welfare to work. I am told by my local Employment Service office that single parents are much more willing to take work, especially part-time work, now that they know that they will keep all the maintenance paid to them.

The Bill provides people with incentives to co-operate. It delivers a clear message to absent parents that they must get off the gravy train, because the easy ride is over. All the escape routes have been closed—it will no longer be possible to engage in little ruses in order to delay payment for three, four or five years—and, at last, attention will rightly be focused on the child rather than the absent parent.

The hidden benefit will, I hope, be the abolition of the independent case examiner. Let us hope that there is no need for that person to continue in that role within six months or a year of the new system coming into effect. *[Interruption.]* I see the professor, the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), is doubtful, but, there again, we are used to that.

I have tabled parliamentary questions many times to find out how much money has been paid through the special payments unit to people who have been abused by the agency, but, for some reason, I can never get an accurate figure. However, tens of millions of pounds of compensation must have been paid for maladministration and abuse by the agency. Again, it will be a bonus when such payments go.

Every week, I and my office spend many hours—I am sure that other hon. Members do the same thing—speaking with the parliamentary business unit of the CSA, at Belfast. The people there are helpful, useful and sympathetic. They do not often come up with answers, but they are always sympathetic. That dedicated unit is there to assist and to serve purely Members of Parliament. The public do not get that service. Again, it is an incredible resource that, in one sense, is a waste: it is there only because of previous chaos. I hope that the new system will mean that we do not need that special privilege and facility any more, and that such work will disappear.

Most important, it is crystal clear, from the Green and White Papers and from the Bill, that children will now benefit from the CSA's actions. That cannot be said to have been the case in the past. Far too many parents with care and children have been let down by inadequate legislation, inadequate administrative systems and inadequate ways of dealing with the business.

I did not intend to, but I should like to speak on the second pension issue because of the points that were raised by the hon. Member for Havant. It is a fact that, post-1988, roughly 6 million people opted out of occupational pension schemes into personal pensions, enticed by a life assurance industry which, he is trying to tell us, will help those on low earnings to take out an appropriate product. That is dreamland stuff.

Responsible sectors of the life assurance industry say that no one on less than £9,000 a year should be in a personal pension scheme, full stop. There is no argument about that. There is an argument as to whether those on between £9,000 and £12,000 should be, but, undeniably, those on less than £9,000 should not.

Other sectors of the industry think that anyone earning £1 a week or more should be in a personal pension. The same sector is writing to people to tell them that their endowment-linked mortgage is not high enough and that they need to put more money in it. It is levying 50 per cent. charges on the extra money that people are having to put in because the company got it wrong in the first place. We need to recognise that those sectors have a vested interest in knocking anything that, in effect, takes them out of the equation, but no one should be in any doubt that the state second pension is the best thing going for anyone on £9,000 or less.

Like many other Members, I have a significant number of extremely poor pensioners in my constituency. Most of them are women, who are poor in retirement because of broken work records and because they were persuaded to

[Mr. Rooney]

stick with paying the married women's stamp, which was the biggest con trick of all time. That denied them the basic retirement pension. Generally speaking, they were on low earnings, so their second pension entitlement is very small.

My late mother worked for 30 years, as well as spending 16 years raising children full time. At 60, her pension entitlement was nil, and her second pension entitlement was nil. That is the world that the hon. Member for Havant seems to want to return to.

The hon. Gentleman seems to think that, when my mother was working, on low wages, she should have toddled down to the local life assurance office and bought a personal pension—although, for the first two years, 50 per cent. of premiums would have disappeared in charges. It is dreamland stuff.

In comparison, my father, who worked for 50 years, has an income above the retirement pension of a mere £24 a week. He receives that amount because, until the 1960s, there was no provision for a second pension.

We then had the other scam—no one seems to mention it nowadays—of the graduating pension, for which one had to live for 14 years beyond retirement age simply to make back what one had paid into it, before receiving any benefit from it.

The state earnings-related pension scheme was introduced in 1978. It seemed like a good scheme at the time, but—notwithstanding the changes made to it in the 1980s—it has not turned out to be as good as we thought that it would be.

The fact is that the state second pension is a guarantee to people that they will be rewarded in retirement, as they have never been before. It has also, for the first time, embraced the issue of carers, people with disabilities, people on low earnings and people with broken work records. In time, we shall see the destruction of the poverty in old age that is a blight on our society.

5.22 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): Towards the end of his speech, the hon. Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) used a critical phrase—that "in time" we shall see those changes. I should like to start my speech by focusing specifically on the Bill's pension proposals. It seems incredible that, despite Liberal Democrat Members' opposition, and with virtually no parliamentary scrutiny, the House will abolish one of the two principal state pension schemes and introduce a new scheme. I make no apology for emphasising the Bill's pension aspects, which—shockingly, unlike the Bill's child support provisions—the Secretary of State almost skated over in his speech.

The time scale in which the new pension scheme will be introduced would make a glacier look positively dynamic. Based on the Department's figures, by 2025, the poorest fifth of pensioners—who, presumably, are the pension scheme's target audience—will be £1.30 a week better off. The Minister of State is already shaking his head. I assume that he does so because he cannot refute the argument, and not because the figure is wrong. I should be delighted to give way to him if he wants to challenge the fact that, in 25 years, they will be £1.30 better off.

Miss Kirkbride: Is that figure adjusted for inflation?

Mr. Webb: It is in today's prices, and is therefore a real £1.30 over 25 years—or about 5p or 6p a year. There is much to look forward to.

It is a shame that the Secretary of State is unable to remain with us in the Chamber; the first point was so crushing that he had to leave.

The Secretary of State said that, by 2047, there will be major increases in state pension entitlements. When I raised the issue of time scales with the Minister with responsibility for pensions, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker)—who generously and helpfully briefed hon. Members before Christmas—he said, "When SERPS was introduced, everyone said that it would take a long time. Look at it now—it's giving people decent pensions." Unfortunately, it is about to be abolished. Nevertheless, the point is that, whereas it took 20 years to build up a full SERPS pension, it will take over 40-plus years to build up a state second pension.

The hon. Member for Bradford, North is shaking his head. Does he believe that that is not the position?

Mr. Rooney: SERPS took the 20 best earning years, but one did not receive the maximum pension after 20 years. If one worked for only 20 years, one did not receive the maximum.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. There is no contradiction. The first people started to get full SERPS pensions within 20 years of the scheme being introduced. No one will get a full state second pension until 2040-odd. That is the difference. The critical point about state pension regimes—apart from the basic pension—is that they tend to last only 10 or 15 years. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the graduated pension, which was abolished. He mentioned SERPS, which is about to be abolished. We have had a succession of state pension regimes that do not last very long. We need sustainability. The state second pension will not exist in 2047. All these promises about what will happen 40 years down the line are not worth the paper that they are printed on.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the schemes are changed because of their huge cost to the Exchequer and the fact that the ratio between those drawing pensions and those paying into the schemes changes? Is that not their weakness, and does it not point to the fact that the funds to which my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) referred are a far better option?

Mr. Webb: Our view is that there must be an appropriate balance between funded and unfunded schemes because there is a risk attached to both. Unfunded promises get ripped up by Governments and entirely funded income is much more subject to the volatility of the stock market. There must be a balance between the two.

The main reason why pensions schemes get ripped up is that no one understands them. No one has a clue how their entitlements are worked out. The previous

Government halved widows' SERPS entitlements and only now—14 years later—have people realised that. These matters are so complicated.

Professor David Piachaud, an adviser to previous Labour Governments, said of the Labour Government's second pension proposals:

"It is the long-term sustainability . . . that seems most doubtful. The plans of Crossman, Joseph, Castle, Fowler and Lilley that were to last for a generation are all no more . . . the odds are that the name Darling will be remembered longer in association with Never-Never land than with pension reform".

That is true. Pension schemes have to be made to last.

The state second pension will be the preserve of the low paid. It will be a second pension only for the low paid and for carers. If it is a scheme just for the poor, what is to stop future Governments doing away with it altogether because the majority of people will have no stake in it?

The current proposal is in breach of a manifesto promise. It is a promise that the Government should never have made but, having made it, they will bring us all into dishonour if they breach it. As we heard from the hon. Member for Havant, the Labour manifesto explicitly pledged to retain SERPS for those who want it. The state second pension will not be an earnings-related pension; it will be a flat rate pension. So, no matter how much the Government try to twist the wording of their manifesto, this is a direct contradiction.

The Government's annual report, which lists their manifesto pledges and whether they have been fulfilled, marks "done" against retaining SERPS. It has certainly been done for.

We do not know a great deal about the state second pension. When will it start? Will it be 2002 or 2003? We do not know for sure. When will it go flat rate? That depends on the success of the stakeholder scheme. What will the rebate structure be? Guess what—a consultation paper has been produced with two alternatives, neither of which are penetrable.

Mr. Cousins: Is it the hon. Gentleman's view that the state second pension is better when it is flat rate or in its initial phase—which, as he said, we do not know the end of—when it is earnings related?

Mr. Webb: I would prefer the first phase, as the second phase represents back-door compulsion. Essentially, it pulls the rug out from everyone on middle incomes and commits them to stakeholder pensions without being honest about it. As a result, the badly advised will stay in the poor-value state scheme and the well advised will probably opt out. We do not want that sort of regime.

The critical factor in pension arrangements is certainty. People need to be able to plan with certainty and these arrangements do not provide for that. No one knows when the scheme will start, when it will go flat rate or what the rebates will be. People hardly know anything about it, so how can they plan their pensions?

It is more complex still. I am grateful to the Minister for allowing his officials to track down this point for me. Page 62 of the explanatory memorandum states that the state second pension will apply only to people who have a good chunk of their working lives ahead of them. People just short of retirement age will not suddenly be switched to the flat-rate scheme. So one group of people close to retirement age will be on one structure, another group will be on the flat-rate structure and others will be in stakeholder, occupational or personal schemes. The whole system will be so complex that it will be a mess. We need simplicity and clarity.

The final and fundamental point about the pensions aspect of the Bill is that, even after 30 or 40 years of reform, the pension will be inadequate. The hon. Member for Bradford, North talked about adequacy and giving people a decent pension in old age. He mentioned the poor return that people may get on private pensions, but a poor return would be to spend 40 years making contributions to the state second pension but to be on income support within five years of retiring. That would be absurd and a waste of time, but that is the Bill's approach to pensions.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): The hon. Gentleman referred to what a future Government might do with the state second pension. Is it not a danger that the state second pension will be uprated only in line with prices, but the minimum income guarantee pension will be uprated in line with earnings? It would be open to a future Government to argue that it would be a far better deal to put people on to the minimum income guarantee pension compulsorily instead of leaving them on the state second pension. That is a worry to those of us who wonder how long the scheme will last.

Mr. Webb: As so often, the right hon. Gentleman puts his finger on the crucial point. A future Secretary of State, when asked to improve the state second pension, will give the same response that the present Secretary of State gives when we say that 75p is not enough—"Oh well, we'll just put it on the means test." Soon the state second pension will do nothing except fill the gap between the basic pension, which will hardly be worth having, and the means test. What is the point of that?

We also object to the child support proposals. The hon. Member for Bradford, North highlighted some of the ostensibly desirable aspects of child support reform, such as the maintenance disregard, which I support. Indeed, I called for it in my maiden speech, so I have again had a major influence on Government thinking. However, support for the maintenance disregard does not presume support for a particular method of working out maintenance liabilities. In other words, we can agree that, however the figure for maintenance is reached, some of it should be then disregarded. To oppose the Government's method for calculating maintenance is not to oppose the disregard—it is the method of calculation that is the problem.

How can I put it?

"Ministers have made no attempt to build flexibility into an inflexible financial formula."

Those are not my words, but those of the First Minister of Scotland commenting on the Conservatives' reforms of the CSA in the mid-1990s. The Labour party used to think that the system should take account of individual circumstances. It used to think that flexibility mattered because it would add to the justice of the scheme, but it no longer thinks so.

The Government recognise that the new system will be unfair and create onerous duties on individual absent parents. The giveaway is that they have lowered the average maintenance figure. The Government know that

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there would be a storm of protest if they tried to collect the same amount of maintenance on average in the rough and ready way described in the Bill. Parents with care and children will lose out, because the Government have had to set lower maintenance assessments to overcome the injustice of a crude formula.

The trade-off for the simple formula that everyone is lauding today is that some children will lose out. How many? That is a subject on which the Government have been astonishingly silent. I tabled a written question just before Christmas asking which categories of people would lose from the reforms and how many people would be affected. The short answer is that the Government have not got a clue. The reply stated:

"to forecast which individual families are likely to be better or worse off . . . we would need to establish the extent to which the non-resident parent is compliant now"—

in other words, whether maintenance is already being paid—

"and estimate future compliance. We have not made such estimates".—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 77W.]

Is not that irresponsible? How can the Government introduce a far-reaching reform to family support without knowing how many gainers and losers will be created and who they are? That is the action of a Government who are irresponsible on child support.

Mr. Rooney: Is the hon. Gentleman telling us that it would be responsible to retain the present system, under which more than 1 million children get nothing? Does not he accept that there has to be a trade-off between fairness and simplicity? [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] We have to accept that the simpler the system, the fewer escape routes there are for non-resident parents.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman seems to want to object to a point different from the one that I was making. I asked how it could be responsible for a Government to introduce a reform without knowing who gains and loses, but the hon. Gentleman spoke about a trade-off between fairness and simplicity. Reform is necessary, but if I were the Secretary of State—as I hope to be one day—and if I were introducing such reforms, I would make an estimate of gainers and losers and make that estimate public. This Government are afraid to do that.

Is the CSA capable of being reformed? The hon. Gentleman said that people who ring the CSA often get a poor quality of service. How can that be changed when, although the numbers are fiddled with, exactly the same personnel are left in the relevant offices?

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Mrs. Humble *rose—*

Mr. Webb: I shall give way in a moment. The issue has to do with the culture of an organisation. What has happened is that the technocrats and anoraks in the Department of Social Security have done the sums and drawn the lines on the graphs, but they have lost the human touch. The culture of the CSA is beyond reform. That is why we believe that the agency should be abolished.

Mrs. Humble: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the section in the report from the Select Committee on Social Security that covers this matter, and concentrates on the need for training staff. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Committee was given reassurances about the importance of training and of ensuring that staff are aware of the needs of people who telephone the agency. Will he accept the reassurances given by the chief executive of the CSA, who told the Committee that she was looking positively at such matters and that she was aware of the problems that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned?

Mr. Webb: Obviously, any improvement in training is entirely welcome, but how often have such assurances been given in the past? How many times have heads of the CSA, past and present, said that the agency would perform better in the future? The culture of inefficiency and backlog, of excuse and cover-up is endemic to the CSA, and it has to go.

Mr. Dismore *rose—*

Maria Eagle *rose—*

Mr. Webb: I want to make some progress.

There has to be an alternative to the CSA. I was flattered that the Secretary of State began his speech by setting up a parody of the Liberal Democrat approach to the matter, and then attempted to knock it down.

The alternative that we advocate is a system based on family courts. In marked contrast with what happened in the past, under our new system, such courts would be given guidelines but, if those guidelines create an injustice for a person, that person will have the opportunity to have his or her individual circumstances taken into consideration. What leaves people most aggrieved with the CSA is the feeling that the formula does not fit their circumstances.

Maria Eagle: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me at long last. I am trying to work out whether the hon. Gentleman is advocating adopting a simplified formula or retaining a complex one. Will he say whether he is in favour of simplifying the formula?

Mr. Webb: Yes, I am indeed in favour of simplifying the formula, which should be the benchmark around which there is scope for discretion in individual circumstances.

In the past, the court process has been rightly criticised for its failings. It was often quicker than the CSA has turned out to be, but there was a problem of inconsistency arising from the lack of guidelines on plausible maintenance assessments. Courts are always given ranges in the sentences that they can impose, so that the right sentence can be chosen to fit the circumstances of each case. They are good at making such choices: why should they not do so in relation to matters of child support?

We are told that the Child Support Agency will move over to the new regime at the end of next year, and that that will require a new computer system. However, the process of securing that new system has not begun. The system has not yet been tendered for. The Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), said yesterday that the Government had not even asked

Parliament for the necessary money yet. Given the chaos of the national insurance recording system, NIRS2—which the Government told me last summer would be sorted out by the autumn, but which I note from a written answer this morning is not to be sorted out for another year—how can we have any confidence that this reform will be brought in on time? How can we have any confidence that the new computer system will be ready? What have the Government been doing for all this time? Why have they not got the new system commissioned and ready for when the legislation and the new formula are in place?

People who work at the CSA have told the Select Committee on Social Security that the management are making preparations to run the new formula on the old computer. That is incredible. Are we to have new cases on the old computer? If so, why do we need a new computer system? If the old computer is not up to it, what chaos will we have? The whole thing has all the makings of another fiasco, and the Government would do well to learn the lessons of the previous ones.

The final section of the Bill contains the obligatory illiberal clauses in any "new Labour" Bill. In this one, we have the benefit sanctions for people who breach community service orders. People on the ground dealing with offenders are united in saying that this is gesture politics. The people who deal with the resettlement of offenders say that it makes no sense as a way of tackling crime. Probation officers—who, presumably, are not all "woolly liberals"; the phrase of the moment—say that it is

"extremely difficult to envisage that the withdrawal of benefits from those who breach orders will enhance public protection or reduce crime."

However, that is not what the measure is about. It is all about tabloid headlines. It is another case where the substance of the policy does not matter—it is about the next morning's headlines.

Any one of these sections would be enough for the House to reject the Bill. Put them together and we have a bad Bill, which we are prepared and proud to oppose.

5.42 pm

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): There has been much interest lately in the reform of the other place. Looking at this Bill reminds me of the need to reform our Chamber, and especially of the need for better scrutiny. Time and again, Governments have introduced legislation aimed at achieving laudable objectives on which there is much agreement; time and again, the measures they have put in place have failed to meet those objectives.

The example of that, par excellence, is the legislation that created the Child Support Agency. There was genuine agreement on both sides of the House that it was right that absent parents should support their children. However, the net result was the absolute shambles of the CSA, which we know about from our casework.

It is interesting that in the Bill the Government will introduce measures to simplify drastically the complex formula that has come about over the years as the previous Government tried to grapple with complaints about the unfairness and lack of flexibility of the original formula. In contrast, the Government are now proposing reforms to pensions that will make the system horrendously complicated. There seems to be no joined-up thinking in the approach to these matters in the Bill.

I wish to concentrate most of my remarks on pensions, although that does not mean that I do not have views on other parts of the Bill. However, time is short. I wish to examine the objectives that the Government have set for pensions reform, which are not entirely covered in the Bill. First, the Government say that they want to reduce dependence on means-tested benefits for pensioners, and that it is quite wrong that, after years of working, people must retire and depend on means-tested benefits. I am sure that everybody agrees with that.

The second objective is to encourage those who can afford it to top up state provision by joining a good private pension scheme. Again, I think that we can all agree with that objective. Not explicitly stated is a third aim that these measures should be rigorous and stand the test of time. That is implied in the proposals, because of course the measures will not come into full effect, as the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) pointed out, for about 50 years.

Do the provisions meet the objectives? Unfortunately, I do not think so. Why do we need reform? If we want to achieve these objectives, the best way would be to ensure that the basic state retirement pension was set at a rate above the income support level for pensioners—the guaranteed minimum pension. That would, at a stroke, remove means-testing for all pensioners.

Private pension schemes have grown as a result of the undermining of the basic state pension and SERPS. I submit that the best way of encouraging more private pension provision for those who can afford it would be to restore a type of SERPS provision, although not exactly the same. I take the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) that it would be too easy for future Governments to raid such schemes, which should perhaps be administered at arm's length by a trustee body. However, some type of SERPS provision could be reinvigorated.

People have difficulty in understanding SERPS, but once it is explained it is reasonably easy to understand the fundamentals. The same cannot be said for the proposals before us. It is not just because of the need to introduce changes in the original proposals to take on board concerns from private pensions schemes and employers that it will not be viable for people earning less than £9,500 to be in occupational pension schemes. The original proposals will have to be tinkered with to do something about those concerns. That will create horrendous complexity. In addition, there are three different accrual rates for the state second pension. People can go in and out of those rates according to how much they earn. It is a very complex scheme.

Pension providers such as the National Westminster Group and the Legal and General Group plc have, along with the Confederation of British Industry, pointed out that the reforms are likely to lead to less private pension provision, not more. In addition, good employers with good occupational pension schemes could decide to stop providing them because it would be easier and cheaper to recommend a stakeholder pension scheme.

There is a belief that stakeholder pensions will be like manna from heaven for people on low incomes, but they are simply personal pension schemes that require people to purchase an annuity on retirement. They are by no means secure. The Government have kitemarked personal pensions to limit charges, and that is welcome; but even

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a 1 per cent. charging regime eats up 25 per cent. of any fund. That can be a significant amount to someone on a low income.

It is not surprising that the Government have accepted the view that to encourage more stakeholder pensions would not provide low earners with a decent pension—hence the need to invent the state second pension. The state second pension has been praised for its redistributive effects and for the fact that it treats people earning less than £9,500—or the threshold set by the Government—as though they earned that amount. That is most welcome, but a simpler way to achieve that aim would be to uprate the basic state pension.

I remind hon. Members that had the basic state pension been linked to earnings, it would now be worth about £27 more a week to a single pensioner. The state second pension will not deliver as good a deal to people in such income brackets. Labour Members should not delude themselves into thinking that the state second pension is a replacement for SERPS. It is not; it is a replacement for the proper uprating of the basic retirement pension. We should do far better to consider that uprating. At the very least, we should increase the state retirement pension to the rate of the guaranteed minimum pension.

People will ask, "How will you afford that?" When people like me propose measures that will cost money, the costs are thrown back in our face, but when the Government propose even more expensive measures, that is okay. We must be aware that the proposals for the state second pension and for the rebates for those with incomes above the earnings threshold will result in a cost of £16 billion. That is the Government's projection when the scheme is fully operational. The Government's proposals will be quite costly—the Secretary of State mentioned a figure of £5 billion. I suggest that we should do better to divert such resources into boosting the state retirement pension.

The need for reform arose because of grave concerns about pay-as-you-go schemes to finance pensions. However, funded systems are not necessarily better than pay-as-you-go systems. I do not have time to go into the reasons for that. The effects on the economy of drawing down a pension from a funded or an unfunded scheme are much the same.

I refer hon. Members to a helpful brief produced for the all-party group on occupational pensions by the Association of Consulting Actuaries. It includes an article by Benjamin Meuli, managing director of J. P. Morgan. He makes the fundamental point that whether the system is funded or unfunded, we need to consider its impact on the economy. There is no evidence that the economies of countries with largely unfunded schemes perform less well than those of countries where most of the pension schemes are funded. On balance, we probably need both. In order to limit the risk in equities, it is necessary for private funded schemes to hold part of their investments in gilts. That is much the same as the Government using the investment from national insurance contributions.

We shall do the country a grave disservice if we continue to undermine the social insurance principle. Despite the attempts of successive Governments to undermine national insurance and the social insurance principle, there is still a great deal of support for both. If people knew that they would receive a good pension, they would be willing to pay into a state system, especially if it were managed in a way that prevented future Governments from raiding it.

It makes no difference to individual citizens whether they pay through national insurance, through a hypothecated tax or into a private pension scheme—they still have to pay. The question is: what gives them the best value? Probably—as in all matters—it is not a good idea to keep all one's eggs in one basket. However, the state has a role to play for poorer people and for those who do not have the opportunity to save for their retirement. The state's role should not be restricted to those people; it should also underpin the private sector, for more affluent people.

I shall support the measure in the Lobby today, but much work remains to be done to make it acceptable. It is necessary to consider the role of the basic retirement pension. We must examine that, and we must receive assurances about it if the Bill is to have any chance of working. I hope that the Bill will be much improved when it returns to this place. I offer my services to the Committee and hope to prove myself wrong in suggesting that the scrutiny process will be inadequate.

5.56 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I begin with the Child Support Agency because it is central to the concerns of my constituents and to my constituency work load, as is the case for every Member of the House. That casework has evolved over time, from simple dysfunction—when no one could get an answer from the CSA at all, whether they were the parent with care or the absent parent, and came to their MP just to have some response—to a more developed state.

At present, there are problems with arrears for parents with care. Those problems reflect past dysfunction and are largely behind us. Arrears have built up; people claim that they did not know and that they cannot cope with the repayments quickly. There is some uncertainty. Once something has got out of hand, it is difficult to bring it back to a manageable state, even with good will from all parties.

Other Members who have spoken in this interesting debate have made the point that the absent parent dodges responsibility—although not always. The parent or new family with care of the child often come to me with problems because that is happening. Therefore, I support the principle that the enforcement of orders should be made more effective. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) has pointed out, there are considerable doubts about whether that will be delivered in practice.

I have several reservations. The first is a gloss on the Opposition's excellent reasoned amendment, in which we talk about the parallel operation of two systems. In fact, there will be three systems that will run together—if not precisely in parallel—because there will also be private arrangements or maintenance orders that have not previously been touched by the CSA system. In principle, such arrangements might continue. One of my concerns, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Havant referred, is that as there is no top limit on the new formula by percentage, the stakes are raised for moving to the new style of assessment at the earliest possible moment. A

parent with care who has anything other than an excellent relationship with the other parent is likely to want to move to the new formula if the absent parent is comparatively affluent. That would destroy court orders or private arrangements altogether.

I have a second reservation. Whereas the old formula was at least, in principle, based on an assessment of need and was tempered or refined even if made more complex by the departures procedure, the new system will function as a tax. It will be a tax with a rather high marginal rate, even allowing for the fact that it will be imposed on net rather than gross income. Page 10 of the explanatory notes provides the helpful example of a mythical person named Neil. He has earnings that range from £150 a week to £170 a week—I take it that those are net earnings on a formula not yet determined—and his liability ranges from £18 to £23 a week, which is a difference of £5. That is an uplift of 27 per cent. or more in his contribution and it amounts directly to a tax rate of 25 per cent. That represents a substantial increase.

My third point—I have written to the Secretary of State about this and not changed my view—is that the provisions in clause 15 on disqualification from driving are highly objectionable in principle. I am not a lawyer, but there is a clear distinction between the perfectly justifiable withdrawal of a driving licence for a car-related offence—whether that is dangerous or bad driving or the use of a car to commit another crime—and the withdrawal of a licence for the purely contingent matter of failure to comply with one's maintenance obligations. It will be interesting to see whether that punishment is to be applied to other offences.

The Secretary of State has certified that the Bill will comply with the European convention on human rights. Frankly, I would not give the Government a chance of winning a case in which a plaintiff said, "I was a driver, I was entitled to drive and I was a safe driver, but, because of some entirely different matter, they took away my rights."

Mr. Rowe: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the person in question lives in a rural area and cannot get to work by any means other than having a car, the principle of taking away a driving licence will be very similar to taking away the right to travel by bus or train from someone who works somewhere else?

Mr. Boswell: My hon. Friend is on to a good point. I was going to list several anomalies and he makes a worthy addition to them. If we are going to take away a car licence, why do we not, for example, take away a pilot's licence if somebody has one? What will happen to non-drivers who cannot be penalised in that way? Why take a licence away from people who do not need a car to get to work, but allow people who need to drive to work to make representations to retain their licence and then, ipso facto, be able to use it for their leisure motoring, too?

Maria Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the suggestion that people might lose their licence might induce a few of them who rely on their cars to pay their child support?

Mr. Boswell: I understand that argument, but I think that it is wrong to use inappropriate remedies, however bad the situation. Remedies must be appropriate to the circumstances.

Mr. Dismore: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boswell: I will not give way again, because all our speeches are subject to a time limit.

My final concern about the CSA is how the Bill will impact in practice. I have already mentioned my constituency experience that non-maintaining parents are now being seen to wriggle. It is very likely that they will adopt what I call the "Cheshire cat solution" to the problem of their income. The obvious first tactic is to quit work or, to a lesser extent, to change employment and to hope that one is not caught up with, thus relying on some transitional friction to escape.

If one is self-employed, probably one of the deftest ploys is either not to declare the self-employment—I know that the Bill intends to address that point—or to evacuate the value of the self-employment by shifting the profits elsewhere. I know of a case in which somebody is said not to make any partnership profits but who is, in effect, maintained by another member of the family. Therefore, no maintenance goes to the spouse with care. The extreme expedient, which will not be fully captured by the Bill unless a British employer is involved, would be to move outside our jurisdiction altogether. Even if they are part of a Cheshire cat solution, none of those ploys by people who should be maintaining their children would leave any smile on the faces of those who actually care for and maintain the children.

I shall comment briefly on other parts of the Bill. On pensions I shall say very little, because I am as confused by the Government's proposals as, I suspect, are many people who are likely to benefit from the state second pension. The system is very complex and it will produce some potentially invidious class distinctions between low, medium and high earners. I have particular concerns for the self-employed. I have read outwith the Bill that there are proposals to limit the rules on tax relief for annual contributions to private pensions, particularly as they would apply to the self-employed, so that one could not buy back into previous years when one did not have sufficient earnings. That would make such pensions less flexible—as a self-employed person, I have benefited from that flexibility in the past. My point mirrors the concerns that I referred to in an intervention about people on lower incomes whose earnings fluctuate week by week. These are points of detail, but they need to be considered.

On part III on enforcement, Conservative Members will generally back well-founded proposals to avoid fraud or the blatant avoidance of payments. We welcome the exchange of relevant information between Government agencies, but the small print requires scrutiny. I am not absolutely sure that the proposals in clause 49 on the withdrawal of benefit do not follow the pattern of the proposals for driving licences that I have already criticised. There may be the random and contingent withdrawal of benefit for offences that are not directly connected to benefit. The Secretary of State must recognise that even control freaks need to play by the rules of the game in hand and not introduce the rules of another game when they are not getting their way.

I wish to say a brief word about some issues that are not covered in the Bill. I welcome proposals that build naturally on the concept of home responsibility payments for mothers in receipt of child benefit that have been established for many years. Proposals to acknowledge the position of carers and of disabled people with intermittent

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spells of employment have been considered. How much they will amount to in practice is a separate issue, but it would be welcome if the point were conceded in principle.

However, the Bill comes after the recent scars of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999, and perhaps it is just as well that it does not specifically address disability issues. One of my criticisms of the 1999 legislation, which has now, notoriously, been passed, was that proposals for incapacity benefit signalled that incentives to save for retirement and to build up one's own pension would be clawed back by a loss of benefit or, conversely, in the payment of taxes.

Since then, I have come across two separate cases involving disabled people. One involves someone who has been employed in the media and who is probably well known to several Members present. I was appalled by the fact that, in effect, he had to hand in his job because he can no longer receive carer support from the independent living fund because of the level of his earnings.

The second case is, in a sense, related. It deals with a couple in an established relationship. One was fully able and the other was disabled, and they wanted to have a disabled facilities grant to balance their responsibilities in running their home. However, because one of them was able, they could not obtain it.

I accept that such cases, which are not new to the Government, are no longer acceptable. If we are trying to build a platform whereby people are given an incentive and opportunities to improve and provide for themselves, rather than staying in an implied dependency culture, we have to start tackling such problems. I see very little sign of that in the Bill, and I regret that. There are many missed opportunities and genuine queries about the detail, and it is for that reason that I shall be pleased to join my colleagues in the Lobby tonight.

6.10 pm

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I am privileged to follow the comments of the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), but like the Secretary of State, I want to spend my few minutes commenting on the three themes of the Bill.

The first is the linking of benefits to certain conditions. I speak carefully on this matter. I have the privilege to represent a seat in which the vast, vast majority of constituents would be a source of real pride to any country. Similarly, the vast, vast majority of parents in Birkenhead are parents of whom we all can be very proud. However, there is a growing group of people, certainly in the poorest areas, who are beginning to behave in a way that is totally unacceptable, and most of their unacceptable behaviour is aimed at other poor people.

I view the Bill's proposals on this issue merely as a beginning, for we are faced, in some of our poorest areas, with a new form of barbarism that is totally unacceptable. Other, decent poor people—the majority—do not see why they should pay their taxes, and try to bring up their children to be good citizens when, sadly, a small but growing proportion of the local community can run amok and destroy those standards.

If I were prophesying, as the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) did in his maiden speech, I would say that at the beginning of this millennium, our constituents are only beginning to make proper demands on us to use the benefits system to try to improve behaviour, particularly in the poorest areas where, as I said, there is a form of new barbarism that is totally unacceptable.

Before long in this place we shall have to debate whether it is acceptable that child benefit should be paid to those parents who are so lacking in parental instincts—the decent feeling that they should put their children before themselves—that they do not care one way or the other whether their children turn up to school. Indeed, they often plot with the children so that they will not go to school. If Labour Members believe that it is only through education that people now have a chance to get out of the rut, we will have to take seriously the view about child benefit, and follow it through.

Similarly, is it acceptable that those who cause mayhem and chaos by their behaviour in the streets should continue to draw housing benefit, whatever they do, knowing that under the present rules, because they have children they will be rehoused elsewhere? My constituents—I am more than happy to make their case here—are already demanding that those parents should lose housing benefit, their children should be taken into care and they should find out what it is like not to have a home. That is the feeling about how bad the behaviour is in a minority of areas in my constituency.

The hon. Member for Northavon may call that illiberal. I have been illiberal for 20 years in the House, and there is much illiberalism to come. If that illiberalism is along the line that I am talking about, I very much welcome it.

The second theme is the Child Support Agency. The Secretary of State said that this is our last chance to reform it and get it in working order. That is a dramatic phrase, which I have used before. He really means that if we do not get it right this time, we will not touch it again, and we will pretend that it is not an issue, although of course it will be an issue for those of our constituents who get a rough deal, or no deal from it. The Secretary of State said that he has an open mind about even the main proposals for the CSA, so I shall state at least three of the structural changes that are necessary if the reform is to get off the ground and begin to crawl, let alone to walk or run.

First, the rates that are currently talked of are too high. It is all very well for us to say what we think rates should be, but there is a political ecology outside the House that we have to understand and win over. The reason for that is not, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) said, that the other side had all the good stories, walloped the reform and won all the press. There was, and is, a feeling in the country that the Child Support Agency, as it is constituted, is not fair.

Until we have a set-up that people feel is fair, and people who brag in the pub that they do not pay, get more than the cold shoulder from their mates, we will not make a success of this reform. Part of the trade-off has to be to get the system to work. We can always increase the rates for new people if it works, but we must bear what the Secretary of State said in mind—if we do not win this time, the system will not succeed.

Secondly, the Department of Social Security and its agencies are not the right bodies to collect money. The body that has the culture for doing so is the Inland Revenue, and it should be given the charge of the new agency.

Thirdly, the formula must be simple. The Government have already conceded too much by saying that they will take into account travel expenses for parents who have to visit their children. Of course we all agree with that, but before it becomes a political shroud that Labour Members shake freely, no one daring to disagree with it, let me say that if that condition remains in the Bill, that will be the new scam.

We fought, quite properly, the good cause of people who were threatened with violence and said that they should be able to plead that. However, the figures for violence have risen from under 3 per cent. of cases to 40 per cent. because everybody knows that claiming violence is a good way of trying to rig the system to their advantage when they have made a private agreement.

There are secondary matters that we also need to take into account. It is not fair to have a minimum £5 levy for everyone and for there to be two rates for those on incomes between £100 and £200. The £5 rate will apply to those on benefits even if their income is between £100 and £200 a week, but a higher formula will apply to those in work on the same or lower earnings. If we add in the value of rents received by people who are already on benefit, I do not see why the same formula should not be applied to them as will be applied to people who are on a similar low income but who earn that income.

I caution against using driving licences. I fear that I may have been among the people who suggested that, but I no longer think that it is a sensible idea. If the Whips in the House want to control us, they must understand what we fear, what we worry about and what will hurt us. We must apply that rule in this case, and my guess is that what will hurt the people who we want to pay is the loss of their passport. They are the people who pay nothing but who go on fine holidays.

The inability to leave, or perhaps to re-enter, the country would be a far greater deterrent than removing people's driving licences. As the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) said, people will simply break the law because it is believed that it is important for people to be able to work, and we would be pushing them to break the law. I am all in favour of toughness, but when we devise the measures, we should ensure that they are ones that people fear, so that they will not be laughing at us.

To develop the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley), there are lessons that we can learn quickly from the private sector. Why is it that it is so much better at tracing parents, generally fathers, who will not pay? I find that most of these fathers have holidays and mobile phones, for example, but the CSA cannot find them. However, within a short time the private agency will find them. We should all be interested in success. We must find where these people are, and I hope that the Government will implement the necessary changes now and not wait for the Bill to go on to the statute book.

We all need the proposed reform to be a success. If the Government are confident that it will be, as I hope it will be, why is it that in the welfare reform Green Paper one of the success measurements relates to improving the CSA, but we look in vain to find a similar inclusion in the new poverty audit? If we are confident about reform, why are we not up front in saying what we expect reform to achieve within a certain period?

The debate on pensions is so different from that on the CSA. With the CSA, we are at the end of the line; with pensions, we are at the beginning. One piece of information shows how difficult pension reform will be. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State rightly walloped the Opposition by saying that they left office after decades in power with one pensioner in three being poor. However, when all the reforms that the Government say that they will introduce are implemented and working to the very best effect that any of us can hope, after 50 years of the reform programme, we shall reduce the number of pensioners in poverty from one in three to only one in four. Before we think that all the answers are in the Bill, it is crucial that we keep our minds open to other reforms.

If the modest reduction to one in four of our fellow citizens being poor is achieved, as my right hon. Friend defines "poor", it must be assumed that there will be a rush of providers for stakeholder pensions. I do not think that there will be, but let us assume that that will be the position. It must be assumed also that, as we read in the newspapers, the exemption that my right hon. Friend is granting to small employers will not have a significant impact on people working in small firms, who are largely on lower pay, who go for stakeholder pensions. Further, it must be assumed that with the best will in the world, our reforms, that we want so much to be a success, have no bad effects on occupational pensions, which my right hon. Friend so often rightly says is the one welfare reform of this century of which everybody can be proud.

The debate is about trying to use our huge welfare budget—the largest budget that the Government have—to ensure that we get the very best behaviour from people, and particularly from that group which is making life impossible for decent people at the bottom. Against that background, I welcome the reforms that are proposed in the Bill but see them as only the beginning.

I do not usually disagree with the hon. Member for Northavon, but he has dubbed the Bill as illiberal. Some of my constituents have been reduced to tears and to breakdowns because of anguish. They do not have our freedom or bank balances to enable them to move away from the wretched people who are causing them distress. There will be a cheer in my constituency for what the Government are doing, and there will be even louder cheers when we return to the issue of linking benefits to good behaviour.

I hope that the Government will live up to the promise that genuinely they have an open mind in accepting radical structural reforms to the CSA that will lead to a simplified formula. As the Bill stands, I do not believe that it will get up and crawl, let alone walk.

We can welcome all that the Government are doing on pensions and I emphasise that the state second pension will provide a level of redistribution that most of us thought that the Government might shy away from. Let us cheer the Government when they are doing things of which we can be so proud and can take into the country. However, we must not let ourselves be fooled by our own rhetoric. If everything goes well and if every reform works, we shall be laying down office and stewardship when we have reduced the number of people in retirement who are poor from a third to a quarter.

6.25 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid–Kent): I was not quite sure to whom the Secretary of State was referring in his opening remarks. I now realise that he was referring to a significant number of his Back-Bench colleagues when he said that some people were clearly born at the wrong time and in the wrong place under a Tory Government.

I have learned today how little I know about pensions. I have worked in this place for about 20 years so far and it is becoming a matter of some urgency to learn a little more about how the pension system works. The fact is that nobody trusts Governments with his or her money. What is more, the record shows that they are absolutely right not to do so.

The reality is that the world at work changes far faster than the world in which pension schemes can operate. When I started contributing to a pension, the idea was to have a final salary pension scheme. There are many people locked into such schemes, which are entirely unsuitable to them. For example, many women are being crucified by the conflict between staying on at work to get a reasonable pension and the need, as they see it, to look after an ailing member of the family. Final pension schemes were designed usually on the basis of a lifetime's work with one employer, but that concept has been overtaken.

I shall give an example of the complexities that arise. When my wife moved down from working five days a week to four for her principal employer, no one had explained to her—I do not suppose that many people understand this—that a full-time pension is based on seven sevenths of the week. If someone moves down to working four days a week, he or she will have four sevenths of a pension. It would normally be thought that on moving down from five days a week to four there would be a pro rata effect on one's pension.

Such complexities, the length of time that pension schemes operate and, as has been well demonstrated, the fact that they become wrapped up by Governments after 10 or 20 years of trying, suggest a possible fault. People want from their pension scheme a reasonable return on the money that they have put in. Would it be unreasonable to suggest that people should have the opportunity every five years to take their pension pot and reinvest it? After every five years they would at least have some control over the scheme in which they are and where they are.

A serious issue about pensions is that they are designed to create a positive disincentive to marry. Many respectable widows and widowers in my constituency are finding it infinitely more satisfactory to live in sin. Some of these people find this distressing. *[Interruption.]* Some Members laugh, but they should understand that some people who were brought up with a particular set of morals find this situation very mistaken.

The Bill demonstrates yet again what an extraordinarily punitive Government we have. All my experience, whether as a schoolmaster or in any other walk of life that I have assumed, suggests to me that people respond infinitely better to incentives than to punishment. Perhaps it would be a great deal better to take, for example, what the National Association of Probation Officers has said about the disincentive effect of punishing people who break their probation conditions by destroying their benefits. The association has pointed out that if someone pays attention to his probation conditions he will win thereby a diminution of the time that he is bound by the order. Such a system would be a great deal better than one that, by punishing, either drives people back to crime, or makes life difficult for conscientious probation officers who believe that more harm than good might be done by their reporting a breach of probation conditions. That matter should be examined in Committee.

My primary focus is on the CSA and its reform. It is extremely distressing to hear the Secretary of State say that there will be more than 2 million children on the CSA's books. A major contributor to the problem of poverty in our enormously wealthy society is divorce: it is the fastest route to family poverty that one can devise. I speak as one who has been through it, so I know how damaging divorce can be to income projections and capital accrual. Divorce impoverishes everyone, regardless of income. Quite apart from that, we should be extremely disturbed by the fact that 2 million children will have experienced the distress of family break-up.

It is too readily assumed that the mother is always the victim. I have heard in my surgeries about a significant number of cases in which the husband has clearly been set up and paid a heavy price. Most distressing to me is to hear of cases in which a father tries to use his access arrangements but is prevented from doing so. If the mother no longer wants to have anything to do with the father of her children, it is easy for her to deny him access, for example, by telling social services that his visits so distress the children that he should be prevented from seeing them altogether.

We must ensure that men who conscientiously pay child maintenance have a clearly defined and properly enforced right to see their children. If that contact has to take place in neutral locations, such as the foyers run by some charities, fair enough. The anxiety that the problem has created must be addressed.

The CSA must be one of the most awful places in which to work. I can imagine no job more dreadful than one that involves being verbally attacked in every way on the telephone when trying to arrive at an objective view of someone's circumstances. I should be interested to learn what the CSA's staff turnover is. Those who come to my surgery would say it must be 100 per cent., because their case never seems to be dealt with by the same person two weeks running.

I suggest a practical way in which the Government might be able to alleviate that problem. There is no technical reason why local authorities and other centres should not provide a facility whereby those who want to discuss outstanding issues with the CSA have on-screen access to the same information as the CSA clerk. That would circumvent the need for a huge amount of correspondence and help to remove a major source of disagreement. Conditions change between someone writing to the CSA and the CSA writing back. It would be enormously valuable to exploit technology to ensure that those on both ends of the telephone conversation have sight of the same information on screen.

The Bill presents considerable difficulties in respect of the true cost of maintaining children. We greatly underestimate the cost of rearing children, but the state has a powerful incentive to try to ensure that children grow up surrounded by a reasonable income. We live in the fifth richest country in the world, and we could

usefully divert far more money to enhancing child benefit. Such a measure would also help families to withstand late maintenance payments.

I have been around long enough to have seen the pendulum swing to and fro between detailed conditions being attached to various benefits, discretionary payments and simple formulae. Every time a simple formula is set up for the sake of easier administration, the number of people who feel that they are unfairly treated because their personal circumstances are not taken into account increases. After a time, an incoming Government decide that changes are needed and either give officials more discretion, or introduce a formula containing all sorts of caveats. All is fine for a while, but officials are human and they all too often give people the benefit of the doubt, with the result that the cost of such discretion outruns what was intended.

Mr. Ian Bruce: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He will recall that, when introducing the Child Support Bill, the previous Government were attacked by everyone, including their own Back Benchers, the then Opposition and the Liberals, for laying down too simple a formula. The reforms carried out made the system more complicated, but it still does not work. Should we not return to first principles, instead of creating another formula?

Mr. Rowe: The issue is a difficult one—the fact that the pendulum swings from one end of the spectrum to the other in all of our benefits debates demonstrates just how difficult. I entirely agree with the Government that what is needed is speed of decision making and resolution. That the assessment of individuals can be months behind schedule is intolerable. Why, when the CSA makes a mistake, does the client pay the price? It seems that the CSA's mistakes are never visited on the CSA. We should establish a reciprocal arrangement, whereby if a client falls behind in making payments because the CSA is behind in making its assessment, the client should not have to pay the additional costs.

6.38 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I have focused carefully on all the speeches made in this debate, especially those that have addressed the subject of pensions. I am in awe of, and admire, those hon. Members in all four quarters of the House who speak with great eloquence and knowledge about pensions. The creation of a proper system of pensions for the people of this country is like holiness: we are all in favour of it and we all have different ideas about how to achieve it, but it is extremely difficult to achieve in practice.

I am persuaded that the Bill at least attempts to ensure that those who have endured deprivation and hardship during their working years or who have experienced periods of unemployment do not have that experience reinforced in the evening of their life.

In that regard, I am pleased to support the measure, although I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), still regret that my party abandoned the policy that it reiterated in general election after general election—that it would restore the link with earnings in respect of pension upgrading. I regret that it has been abandoned. When she mentioned the matter, one or two of my colleagues, whom I hold in high personal regard, uttered from a sedentary position, "How will we pay for it?" Of course, if it were done as a big bang now, it would be enormously difficult. We must recognise that much water has gone under the bridge, but we should not have abandoned the principle or the objective.

To the extent that there is a marginal difference between me and the Government, I believe that we should have been more ambitious in our redistributive policies, and that we probably should not have accepted for two years the Conservatives' budget in terms of overall expenditure.

We should have been bold and brave, as some were a score of years ago with the Rooker-Wise amendment. It was an ambitious move, which Government Front Benchers then resisted because of costs. Sometimes parliamentarians prevail, to their eternal credit. They will be remembered for that, and perhaps not for what they do later. I still say to the Government that we should be more ambitious in our desire to redistribute wealth.

With reference to the Child Support Agency, I listened carefully to what hon. Members said. The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) has a point on the narrow issue of driving licences. All too readily, legislation is certified as complying with the European convention, and there is a danger of our draftspersons devaluing that certificate. They would have said that it complied, even before we signed up. We should be more cautious.

Not only will the provision be challenged if it is enacted—I hope that we will rethink the matter in Committee—but it is also illogical. Leaving aside the European convention point, one could ask why driving licences; why not bicycles, or equipment for train-spotting, bird-watching and so on? There could be a schedule of ways in which people could be penalised. This is not the best concept in this important and valuable piece of legislation.

I listened to the intervention of the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), who tried to rewrite history by observing that the Conservative Government were criticised for the legislation introducing the CSA because it was simple. The criticism that should be levelled against the Conservative Government is that the concept was marketed in such a simplistic and populist way. The word was put around by the spin doctors of the day and taken up by the press that there was a vast army of men out there who were not paying maintenance but could pay, and that it could simply be collected off them.

The CSA was almost universally thought to be a good idea, and some of those who were most enthusiastic about it are now attending our surgeries. They made arrangements with their former spouses or partners or diligently endeavoured to meet their responsibilities. They have, in a sense, been contributing to the work of the CSA, and now realise that it was a big fib that there was a large group of people out there who could pay child support and from whom it could be collected. The truth has now been rumbled. Of course, we know now that it ain't that simple.

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

One of the lessons of the CSA legislation is that there was insufficient proper scrutiny of its effects by the House.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South) *rose—*

Mr. Mackinlay: I shall give way to my hon. Friend, but I remind him of the time limit.

Mr. Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene, and I shall be as quick as I can. Does he remember that originally, in 1991, the then Government, who are now the Opposition, sold the idea of the CSA on the basis that they would pursue absent fathers, and set a target of £2 billion that they would save as a result?

Mr. Mackinlay: One of the principal elements of the legislation was revenue collection by the Government, rather than the social consequences of improving the quality of life and the resources available to families and children. We must recognise that it was a bad piece of legislation.

I listened open-mindedly to the remarks of the Liberal spokesperson, the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), which had some merit. However, we are not starting from scratch. We must deal with the system that we inherited.

The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), is not in his place, which I regret. Indeed, I regret that several Secretaries of State and principal spokespersons are not present. The shadow Secretary of State leaned on the Dispatch Box and asked how we would cope in the interim period, during the changeover, as though the situation were a cock-up created by the Labour Government.

No one suggests that the interregnum—the changeover—will be easy, but we shall have to cope. It is not ideal and there will be hiccups. The people to blame—the architects of the ill-conceived legislation—are not on the Government side of the House, but on the Opposition side. A period of silence by the shadow Secretary of State would have been appropriate.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Mackinlay: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman will have had four or five bites of the cherry. Sit down.

I stated in a letter to Madam Speaker that I wished to speak on a particular matter, which has not been mentioned this evening—the part of the Bill that amends the law relating to war pensions. We should not lose sight of that, despite the tendency to group three or four Bills together in one Bill, which is wrong.

I wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State before Christmas, reminding him of the fact that I had a ten-minute Bill supported by hon. Members from right across the political spectrum. It mirrored a Bill that had been passed by the House of Lords, with the Government spokesperson there saying that the Government were not opposed to the measure. It was introduced in the other place by Alf Morris. It is a simple measure that could be incorporated in this Bill in Committee.

Under the measure, the Secretary of State would be obliged to make a report to Parliament every year, after consultation with all interested parties, particularly the ex-service organisations, about the expenditure in the previous financial year on service pensions, war pensions and war widows' pensions. The measure is obviously sought by the Royal British Legion, the Officers Pension Society, the Royal Naval Association, the Royal Air Forces Association and the British Limbless Ex-Servicemen's Association. It would be immensely appreciated if Parliament took the opportunity to put that on the statute book.

If the Under–Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle) has been briefed by her civil servants that I intended to raise the matter, she might remind me that there is already a statutory report on war pensions, which comes to Parliament. However, it is not subject to statutory consultation in advance, it is not required to reflect whether sufficient resources are available to meet the new needs created by the inevitable advance of age among war veterans, and it does not incorporate service pensions or war widows' pensions.

It is time that Parliament revisited the matter. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will say, in the spirit in which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State dealt with other parts of the Bill, that the Government are open to suggestions and are prepared to accept amendments in Committee.

I do not want to labour the point tonight, but I hope that the issue might be an example of the popular desire for Parliament to recognise the need to tackle, through an annual report to Parliament, the interests of ex-service men and women, people who receive war pensions, war widows and their dependants. It is important to do that because, unlike other Parliaments around the world, we do not have a dedicated veterans Minister or an annual debate on veterans' issues. I regret that. The last debate on that matter was on 1 July 1996. I was fortunate enough to win the ballot for one of the last private Member's motions on a Friday and we held a well attended, full day's debate on the subject. Tony Newton, the Minister who replied, was sympathetic to the proposal of holding an annual debate. There are annual debates on other issues, and I hope that the current Minister will take up the suggestion.

We all have a view about our obligations to people who have made sacrifices on behalf of the United Kingdom in the various conflicts of the century that has just passed. I hope that my proposal for an annual report will be incorporated in the Bill in Committee or on Report, and that it will go some way towards not only tackling Parliament's deficiency in considering veterans' issues, but prompting the annual debate to which I referred. I hope that the Government will reflect on that, and that my colleagues who are fortunate enough to serve on the Committee will adopt the proposal and push it through.

6.52 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay). I contested that constituency—alas, unsuccessfully—in 1979. I hope that hon. Members who serve on the Standing Committee will endorse his last suggestion, which is perfectly proportionate and sensible.

The Government took office claiming that they intended to reform the welfare system. The measure is their set-piece Bill for their first—and hopefully their last for some time—Parliament in government. Yet what will be the headlines in tomorrow's national newspapers? I suspect that they will simply be about taking away driving licences from those who do not pay their contributions.

We live in a society that is generally becoming wealthier. Newspaper reports this week suggest that more and more people own their homes, the value of housing is rising and an increasing number of people have savings and shares. Most people can therefore make adequate pension provision for themselves. The test for the Government, especially a Labour Government, is what the provisions achieve for the less well-off and the poorer members of our community. I have heard little that is coherent about that. Indeed, the cut-off of £9,000 and the various other provisions will make it more difficult for those who are less well-off.

Just before Christmas, the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) crossed the Floor. The day before he did that, there was a by-election in my constituency, which is next door to his. It took place in the sort of ward that, I suspect, exists in all constituencies. It comprises a solid housing estate, including a few houses that have been bought under the right-to-buy provisions, and is the sort of ward that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) mentioned: it consists of many decent people but its unemployment rates are above average. The by-election took place in a ward that the Labour party had held for the past 27 years. On the day, 5,000 people had an opportunity of casting their votes. The Conservative party won, despite the excellent Labour candidate, who was leader of the Labour group on the district council. He has been mayor of Banbury and his wife has also been mayor. He has devoted his life to public service in the town and lives in the ward. He lost because many Labour voters no longer see a reason to vote Labour.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): What was the turnout?

Mr. Baldry: The hon. Gentleman asks for the turnout figures, but after two and a half years of a Labour Government, the people in that ward, which has been Labour for almost a generation, had no incentive to turn out and vote Labour. If one visits hospitals nowadays, one finds that nurses feel no incentive to support the Labour party.

The Bill should tackle the needs of the many poorer members of our community. If they hear about the measure, they will feel that it does little for them. I emphasise to my hon. Friends on the Front Bench that the Bill gives us an opportunity. I hope that the Opposition will make it clear—as my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts), the shadow Secretary of State, did in his opening remarks—that the measure does nothing for the worse off in our society.

The place for those who believe in one nation, and in helping those who are less well off, is the Opposition Benches, not the Government Benches. The Labour party has become so keen to appeal to the meritocracy that it has forgotten those who live in wards such as Ruscote in my constituency or many of the wards in Thurrock, where I pounded the streets in 1979.

If one knocks on doors during the local government election campaigns in the spring, and asks pensioners and the less well-off whether the Bill does anything to make them or future generations better off, very few will say that the measure is worth while. While many hon. Members will spend weeks in Committee, going through the measure line by line and clause by clause, it will achieve little for the poorer members of our society.

Mr. Hoyle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Baldry: I am sorry, but I am about to finish.

The Bill is a wasted opportunity. If it is the Government's social welfare reform showpiece, I am proud to be a Conservative. I hope that, in the next Parliament, we shall have the opportunity of introducing decent pensions legislation that helps those who are less well off.

6.58 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): Like many Labour Members, I support the Bill. I want to speak about part I, which deals with child support. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) said, it will enjoy positive support in our constituencies. We shall see the success of the measure in future. I agree with my right hon. Friend and many other hon. Members that it constitutes a big step in the right direction.

Like all hon. Members, Child Support Agency cases form a large part of my postbag. They include absent parents who complain about muddle, delay and, all too often, grossly incorrect assessment. They also include parents with care—mothers who are almost always alone and who complain that the fathers pay next to nothing towards the care of their offspring. Complaints are made because, in tight-knit communities such as those I represent, it is common knowledge that a father's life style is such that he could adequately support his children.

I also deal with exotic cases. Some mothers have immense difficulty in getting any cash from dads whom they suspect deliberately work in a country with which we have no reciprocal agreements for social security deductions. Also, absent fathers are assigned the bill for the wrong set of children because they have been misplaced on an information technology filing system. One man was deemed to be the absent father of a child by a woman he had never heard of, from a part of the country he had never visited in his life. It turned out that he had been placed on that file because he had the same unusual forenames and surname given by the mother.

Those cases would be laughable if such gross errors did not cause great worry and heartache at the minor end of the scale. At the serious end of the scale, they can lead almost to tragedy. The man I referred to came within a cat's whisker of having his marriage dissolved because of the strain he was under. Many others suffer greatly, such as the men who tell me that they will have to quit work, and the women who cannot get a job because the lack of parental contributions from the absent father means that they cannot afford nursery or child minding facilities.

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

Like many of our great social disasters, the CSA had its genesis in the former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. In a speech to the Pankhurst Society in 1990, she said:

"We have proposals which will help lone parents . . . the whole process will be easier, more consistent and fairer".

That hyperbole hid the real reason behind the CSA—the drive to cut social security spending. The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) let the cat out of the bag at the launch of the CSA in 1993, saying:

"The total costs to the taxpayer of supporting lone families reached almost £5 billion last year. Many taxpayers resent paying out to support children of parents who may have incomes higher than themselves."

No one will argue with that last sentence, but the net result was that, through its modus operandi, the CSA probably helped to impoverish families and create a growing lone parent underclass. Conservative Members who were Members of the House at that time cannot say that we did not warn them of what was coming.

I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment will not be too embarrassed if I refer to the speech that he made on behalf of the Opposition when the Child Support Act 1991 was being debated. Moving our amendment, he said that the Bill

"leaves lone parents on Income Support not one penny better off . . . allows maintenance payments to be disrupted if the absent parent defaults . . . and does not tackle more serious problems facing lone parents and their children".—[*Official Report*, 4 June 1991; Vol. 192, c. 194.]

He was spot on and we all now know it, which is why we are debating how to make progress.

Yet again, we have to clear up a mess that was left by the previous Government, who ran this country for 18 years. Armed with first-hand knowledge of how the CSA has wrecked lives and the system's inherent faults, we have a Bill that will tackle those evils and those faults. We have a Bill that contains measures that will contribute to our fight against child poverty, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, and help to support the lone parent family.

Above all, we need a simple formula—and today we have one. Hon. Members and their caseworkers have become experts on the CSA formula.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Kumar: I shall give way briefly because I have only 15 minutes in which to speak.

Mr. Öpik: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I agree that there is a case for reform, but does he not agree that, to some extent, those reforms will replace one set of injustices with others? Some of the people he is trying to help will be harmed by the changes.

Dr. Kumar: I do not see it like that; all I see is a simple formula that will provide a clear direction for us to take. I hope that that will solve a lot of the problems and I am sure that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench will respond to them in detail. *[Interruption.]* It is all very well for the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) to laugh, but I was generous enough to allow the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) to intervene. He has not been present for all of the debate, so, rather than laughing, perhaps hon. Members should listen and learn.

All hon. Members would happily relinquish their role in such cases. *[Interruption.]* I know that the hon. Member for Northavon finds this amusing, but he should listen to what we have to say; he might learn something. Above all, we need a simpler formula, and that is at the heart of the Bill. A simpler formula has to be the starting point. It would be transparent, easily understandable, easily enacted and simple to work with. In that context, I must make it clear that my complaints about the CSA system are not made against the dedicated staff who work in the agency. In my experience, the staff at the office in Falkirk, which serves my area, do their best for their customers and service users, but are defeated by having to work with bad and underfunded IT systems, and having to cope with a constant avalanche of changes to the formula and the consequent avalanche of complaints from people who feel they have been wrongly assessed.

I believe that the basic proposals in the Bill are simpler for fathers—they are more understandable, more realistic and can be more easily assessed against income—and fairer to lone mothers because they are simpler. It will be easier to collect money, and easier collection should mean that cash circulates faster in the system. Mothers will therefore have the right to expect money to be correct and paid on time. Above all, the proposals are fairer to the children.

I am also pleased that the new formula is accompanied by a tougher regime for ensuring collection and the co-operation of absent parents with the system. We all know of mothers who received almost total non-co-operation from self-employed absent fathers who knew that the chances of them having finally to put their hand in their pockets were effectively nil. The artificial blockage between the CSA and the Inland Revenue—a bureaucratic blockage that has blighted too many lives—will be bulldozed out of the way. I am pleased that such draconian measures have been included in the Bill. We should not shed too many tears over the confiscation of a passport, which was referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, or the imposition of a prison sentence because of the neglect of a man's children. I have seen too many lone mothers in tears already.

The measures should be considered with other measures to support families, such as the working families tax credit, new child care and nursery initiatives, improvements to housing benefit and other state benefits and, of course, the minimum wage—which Labour Members support, unlike the Conservatives. All that means that we now have a comprehensive and holistic structure for child and family support, but we must not assume that the Bill may not have shortcomings. Some were mentioned by my right hon. Friend.

Our experience of past child support legislation shows that we are dealing with an inherently complicated issue. It has been further complicated by the fact that CSA staff and benefit advisers were dealing with men and women who, in many cases, had already undergone agonising separation. The image of the "deadbeat dad" reflects the reality for a small minority, but in my experience—and, I suspect, that of many hon. Members—they are a very

small minority. The fathers whom I meet are different. Most wanted, and want, to support their children, but have found themselves beaten by the system. They see their children as the ultimate victims of that. The real problem with the existing system is that an inherently bad mechanism has been consistently and regularly overlaid by amendments and alterations, born in this place. There have been myriad draft regulations and statutory instruments.

I want to convey a simple message to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State: "Please do not allow your advisers or your civil servants to influence you, persuading you to make 'a little adjustment here, Minister' or 'a little tweak there, Minister'". That would be the first step towards a retreat into complexity, allowing the growth of a new byzantine structure that would be hard to understand and harder to penetrate.

The mothers and fathers whom I see at my surgeries want to get on with rebuilding their lives, confident that their children will be adequately supported whether they are living with them or with their former partners. That is a simple aim, which I hope and expect the Bill to fulfil. The aim is not to damage our future—that is, our children. The men and women who constitute the human face of the 200-odd cases with which I am currently dealing want the same. The Bill is for them, and I welcome it on their behalf.

7.11 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): I echo what the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) said about the staff at the Falkirk office, whom members of the Social Security Committee visited. I must admit that—like, perhaps, many hon. Members—I had, before my visit, entertained rather a low opinion of the staff, having listened to what all my constituents were saying. On that visit, however, I became aware of all the problems with which the staff have to deal, the enormous pressure that they are under and the low wages that they are paid. I now think that they are doing a good job in very difficult circumstances, and I am happy to pay tribute to them.

I do not know what the House considers to be the purpose of family law, but I believe that it is to create a structure in society whose aim is to keep couples together, if that is possible, and, if it is not, to ensure that absent fathers—it is usually the fathers who are absent—remain in touch with their children and support them. That is a simple aim, which I think is supported by members of all parties, but in that respect we have failed as a society. A third of non-resident parents pay nothing, and 50 per cent. of children in poverty come from single-parent families. Daughters in single-parent families, where the single parent is not working, have only a 7 per cent. chance of obtaining higher education qualifications.

The present system is clearly not working, so what we are discussing now is what we can do to improve it. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) that our chief concern should be for those who are most vulnerable and have the least resources.

I was privileged to share most of last week—while I was thinking about what I would say today—with a man called Jean Vanier, who set up the L'Arche homes for people with severe learning disabilities. Small beginnings were built up into a worldwide movement. We are discussing circumstances that involve much pain and anger; he deals with circumstances involving an enormous amount of pain and anger, and disability as well. He has been extraordinarily successful in overcoming the difficulties by adopting an intensely personal approach to each case. Everyone is treated as an individual and has a personal assistant. The help that is given is not simply material—although I suppose that asking the CSA to give other than material help would be asking too much of it.

I conclude from that visit that we shall make real progress in meeting social objectives only through a personalised system. That would involve someone sitting down with the couple concerned, if possible—or with the two people separately, if they refuse to be interviewed together—working out the total income involved, and encouraging the father to adopt a system of payments and visiting. Some may say that they accept all that, but it is not possible. Let us look at the present system, which has become unbearably complex. Because it must deal with a hundred items of information, the CSA spends 90 per cent. of its time making calculations and only 10 per cent. on enforcement. The whole thing is a mess. Society must give up on it and move to a simplistic system of crude rough justice.

The pressure imposed on the CSA by existing claims is such that we must move to such a simple system. To do that would be intensely unpopular politically, but it is the only option for the Government. The lack of a clear timetable is dangerous: the existence of two systems operating side by side will cause enormous vexation and unhappiness.

The Government, being politically acute, realise that a move to the new system for existing claimants would be unpopular. I think that it would be right, but the Government are not going to do it: they are going to introduce the new system only for new claimants. That is a shame, although it may be necessary. I understand all the difficulties. As a member of the Select Committee, I have visited the CSA and studied its work. I have listened to what my constituents have said, and I know that it is rough justice, but at the end of the day we are not being very ambitious, are we? We are giving up on so many people. We are saying that we, as a society, believe that a child is worth 15 per cent. of someone's income. A child is not worth 15 per cent. of someone's income; a child is worth 100 per cent. What right have we to say that we are so lacking in ambition—so unwilling to try to use the levers available to us—that we set arbitrary formulae such as this?

Human nature will break through, as it always does. The small print tells us that the departures will be abolished and variations will be introduced. Once variations are introduced, they will multiply, just as they did when we tried to introduce a relatively simple system. They will multiply because fairness and justice will demand it, and we shall end up with a system very similar to the present one. If the Government cannot afford to devise a personalised system, perhaps they will at least provide a named official to ensure that both parents deal with the same person throughout the process.

I want to say a little about pensions. We are creating an affluent society. Over the past two decades, 80 per cent. of richest pensioners have been better off, and a third of the poorest have been better off. We should be ambitious for society: we should encourage everyone to provide for their old age. I agree with what many have

[Mr. Edward Leigh]

said about the complexity of the three current different systems. We need a seamless web enabling us—by means of compulsion, if necessary—to force people to make adequate funded contributions.

The Government have made the fair point that those who earn less than £9,000 a year are unlikely to be able to build up a fund sufficient to raise them above the means-tested benefit level. I do not know the answer; I simply know that a complicated system involving stakeholder pensions, second pensions, occupational pensions and personal pensions will not encourage people to accept the funded system that we all want. The only way is to have some element of compulsion but, once that is in place, let people choose the sort of system that they want. Many countries have gone down that route. I am convinced that the private sector is best placed to provide such a choice.

I have talked about society being ambitious. One ambition can be to break and to restore broken relationships. We can try to build communities. There is no point talking about building a world community, a European community or a national community if we cannot use whatever small resources we have to build community between two people.

Jean Vanier told a moving story that affected my ideas on the subject. He has a friend who is a French lady and very elderly. In the 1940s, she was very good looking and a fine pianist. Everyone liked her. She had a tremendous future. When the war started, she joined the resistance. Eventually, she was captured by the Gestapo after using her piano-playing prowess to try to infiltrate it and to warn the resistance of what was going on. The Gestapo tortured her to the extent that it destroyed her entire nervous system. She would never be free from pain for the rest of her life. She went into that prison with 20 people, but she was the only one to survive.

The person who tortured that lady was a young Nazi doctor called Leo. In 1983, she received a telephone call and she immediately recognised his voice. He said that he was about to die and wanted to come to see her. He did so. They talked for two hours and he asked for her forgiveness. She forgave him. They embraced. As he was going away, he asked what he should do. She told him and he did it: he went back to the Austrian village where he was the burgomaster—he had admitted nothing about his past; he was a distinguished man—and admitted everything in front of the whole village. Two or three weeks later, he died.

What that tells me about human beings is that they can build some relationship, but that we as a society have, in many respects, given up on people. We say that we cannot be ambitious for society, create a framework in which people stay together, forgive each other, ensure that fathers look after their children, or recreate a sense of hope in our estates. That is very sad indeed.

7.23 pm

Mr. David Crausby (Bolton, North–East): Welfare reform is, by its nature, controversial in that it will for ever be popular to increase welfare and unpopular to propose any reduction in benefits, so it makes a pleasant change to be able to speak on a welfare reform measure with which I almost entirely agree. Interest will inevitably concentrate around the Bill's measures on the CSA and reform of the state earnings-related pension scheme, but the Bill also contains important changes to the way in which occupational pension funds are managed. I am especially concerned about those aspects, which have been almost entirely ignored in the debate.

Anyone who contemplates a future in British politics will surely support the reform of the CSA for parents who live apart. Many of us have waited with bated breath since we were elected for the delivery of an understandable system of child support rates. Most of us would agree that the principle that absent parents must be held responsible for the maintenance of their children is completely sound, but the present system of enforcement is incredibly unfair.

We must all have had constituents who have suffered injustice as a result of the present provisions. I am delighted that one of the aims of this long-awaited Bill will be to introduce lower rates for non-resident parents on very low incomes.

A simpler method for the calculation of child support has been desperately needed. At long last, legislation proposes a formula that will at least be clearly understood. Most important, we must ensure that the changes that we enact will primarily be in the interests of children, who have too often been under-represented in the years of debate on child support.

Part II deals with the state second pension. I hope only that the Government will do a better job in delivering a second pension than a series of Governments have done in the past. The sad reality is that, historically, Government have proved to be no more trustworthy when it comes to the actual payment of pensions than those who controlled the *Daily Mirror* pension scheme. That is not surprising as we permit a situation where we have not built up the adequate funds required to guarantee the payment of pensions.

As politicians, we would not tolerate, or consider tolerating, a private pension provider paying its pensioners out of current members' contributions, yet that is the situation. Our Government operate a pay-as-you-go scheme, expecting today's national insurance contributions to pay for today's pensions.

I hate to have to say it, because I always strongly believed in the state provision of pensions and still do, but the historical reality is that pensioners would have been much safer in the hands of a dodgy insurance company than they have been depending on the whim of some future Government either to pay or to renege on the promise of a pension. With those words of caution, I enthusiastically support the measures in the Bill concerning child support and SERPS, but we must not forget the important issue of the control of occupational pension funds. I intend to confine my remaining remarks largely to aspects of the Bill that involve occupational pensions.

I almost entirely agree with the Bill, but I nevertheless have some reservations about the clauses that deal with reforming the regulation of occupational and personal pensions. I am particularly concerned about the Bill's proposals on member-nominated trustees, which do not go nearly far enough.

The Pensions Act 1995 was an important step in the right direction. I loudly applauded it at the time. For the first time, there was a general requirement for members to have the right to nominate and to select one third of

their scheme's trustees. Before that Act, we had the ridiculous situation of employers having the right to appoint trustees on behalf of their employees. It was a patronising concession in the 1978 legislation, which allowed workers to be involved in decisions concerning their pensions, but based on the precept that those workers could not be entirely trusted to decide whom their trustees would be.

The 1995 Act was a step in the right direction, but did not, of course, do enough to defend pension scheme members. Although the Bill is a further improvement, there is still some considerable way to go.

Why, for example, should member-appointed representatives amount to only one third of the trustees? If it is right for employees to be involved in the management of their pension funds, why must they always be in a minority? Clearly, proper control of pension funds should be in the hands of those who should have ownership of those funds. The most prudent managers will inevitably be those who have most to gain or to lose from a fund's good or bad administration.

It makes sense that employers who have responsibility for variable contributions to a fund—and, thus, the obligation to ensure that the pension scheme is sufficiently funded—should, quite rightly, be entitled to have authority and influence over the fund. To deny reasonable representation to responsible employers would be counter-productive in encouraging those employers' involvement in occupational pension schemes, and good employers deserve to be encouraged in the provision and management of pensions.

Unfortunately, however, all employers are not automatically responsible employers. When employers enjoy a contributions holiday for several years while members continue to pay, I start to take a different view about their in-built right to a majority of trustee appointments.

I believe that representation on a board of trustees, and control and influence over a pension fund, should be linked to the contributions paid. If, for example, an employer has paid over 50 per cent. over the lifetime of a fund, that employer should be entitled to majority control. However, when the balance shifts—as could quite easily happen in a mature fund, to which employees are making the majority contribution—the balance of power on the managing body of trustees also should shift. Therefore, should an employer wish to retain a majority of the appointed trustees, the very minimum that the employer should be prepared to do is to contribute at least as much to the scheme as the members have contributed to it.

I spent 19 frustrating years serving as an employee representative trustee on an occupational pension scheme, and much of my time was spent struggling with employer-appointed trustees who, when it came to the crunch, almost exclusively reflected the point of view of the employer who appointed them. Too often, meetings became a negotiation between employee-elected trustees and employer-appointed trustees.

I do not blame anyone for that type of behaviour, because the way in which our schemes are established in law make such conflict inevitable. In truth, it was more than their job was worth for employer-appointed trustees to act against the interests of the hand that fed them. Moreover, if they had behaved differently, the result would have been almost immediate replacement by someone who was more responsive to the company's interests.

I do not want anyone to get me wrong: I do not have any problems with the practice of pension negotiations between employers and employees. Indeed, I think that pension negotiations are a very healthy exercise, and encourage them as often being much more constructive and less inflationary than the negotiation of pay increases. My concern is that the board of trustees is not the place for negotiations, as trustees' common responsibility should be the prudent management and investment of their fund. When trustees are answerable to different masters, they will inevitably respond differently, and not always act in the interests of their pensioners and fund members.

The Bill contains clauses on winding up schemes. Winding up a pension scheme, for whatever reason, could have a devastating effect on the lives of its members. An elderly person's accumulated package of pensions is similar to a child's education in that one gets only one shot at it, and, once it starts to go wrong, it is extremely difficult to put right. When a company goes into liquidation close to the end of a man or a woman's working life, he or she may suffer incredible shock. Understandably, scheme members cannot grasp why it should take years to sort out their pension scheme.

I therefore welcome the Bill's proposal to require that regular reports be made to the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority, which clearly has to have a stronger role in those traumatic circumstances, so that it is able to add some impetus to the process.

Trustees should, of course, have the time to ensure that they comply with their obligations under trust law, and they must be supported in often very difficult and frustrating circumstances so that they are able to do their job properly. However, employees often have expectations of pensions that are calculated to the very last penny and plans beginning on the very day that they retire. Changes in those expectations may be devastating to those people and could make them feel extremely vulnerable. In such circumstances, the very last thing that those working men and women need is for a wound-up scheme to take years in which to resolve its liabilities. I therefore welcome the Bill's proposals to speed up the process.

My only word of caution is that schemes in difficult circumstances are rarely overfunded, and that we must ensure that the operation is as inexpensive as possible. Ultimately, we should remember that the reforms are about protecting workers who have expectations and entitlements to a pension, rather than about rewarding organisations and highly paid individuals who seem to appear and descend like vultures when a scheme is in trouble.

There is so very much more to do in the minefield of occupational pension funds, which really should be there to provide for us in old age. Nevertheless, with the reservations that I have described, I welcome the Bill's provisions as an important step in the right direction. I look forward to many more steps on the road to ensuring fairer and more accountable delivery of decent pensions.

7.36 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Bolton, North–East (Mr. Crausby); the whole House is better informed because of his experience and knowledge of, and expertise in, the subject.

This has been a very good debate, in which many very good and positive points have been made. The debate will have been well worth while, if the Secretary of State is as good as his word, and if the Government are serious about taking on board some of positive points that have been made by hon. Members on both sides of the House—certainly the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, Baroness Hollis has been at pains to consult widely, and that is much appreciated; I am chairman of the Social Security Committee, which has had the benefit of much of her time and energy, for which we thank her.

I should like to start with a procedural point, and expand a bit on the comments of the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) on how the Bill has been constructed. Although many points have been made in the debate, no one has yet dwelt on procedural matters.

First, although the Minister of State is a seasoned hand in the legislative stakes, procedurally, the Bill is a dog's breakfast. There should have been two Bills, and the whole House would have been better informed if we had had two half-day debates, with two shorter Standing Committees—I am not asking for more Government time. Had that been done, the debate would have been much more coherent.

Secondly, it is madness to interleave new legislation into the Child Support Act 1991, as it will make the legislation—if anyone understood it in the first place—totally incomprehensible.

Thirdly, clause 27 is entirely redolent of the 1991 Act. Even the notes produced by the Government describe wide-ranging discretionary powers, all exercisable in negative procedure resolutions. None of the resolutions will use the affirmative procedure, so that they will have to be dealt with in prayers. We have been there before. In 1991, when the Child Support Agency was established, the damage was done in the secondary legislation—and here we go again.

Clause 27 is, therefore, offensive. The Government really must understand that, if they are to win the confidence of the House, never mind anyone outside it, they will have to fall over backwards to ensure particularly that the House knows what is going on and when, and that they keep us advised appropriately.

Fourthly—my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) made passing reference to this—it is offensive to invite the House to examine on Second Reading the principle behind important and far-reaching legislation on the state second pension—the consultation period on which ends in three days—without any access to a coherent overview of the results of that consultation process.

I do not blame Ministers for that, because I know that the business managers are a pretty draconian bunch to try to win arguments over. Nevertheless, from a parliamentary point of view—I am not making any party points at all—the legislation should have been handled in an entirely different manner. Indeed, the parliamentary draftsman should be brought to book. There is an argument that the Government are introducing too much legislation and the draftsmen cannot cope with it, but I do not have time to address that. Given that the Government are introducing a large volume of legislation at such a rate, the House of Commons deserves better information and a better legislative process in respect of these important measures. However, I shall let that pass.

As Chairman of the Social Security Committee, I acknowledge that the Department helped us enormously with the three-day evidence session and that Baroness Hollis made absolutely every effort to give us all the information.

As one or two of the points that I wanted to make have already been covered, I shall turn to the ones that have not. I am sceptical about the value and the accuracy of the regulatory impact statement. It is far too optimistic about the effects on business. The point has been made that we shall have to toil through the transitional arrangements. The deduction of earnings orders and the new criminal sanctions that can be visited on business people if they actively withhold information will also produce difficulties. If the enforcement that we anticipate under the new regime is not carried out carefully, small businesses in particular will have to make a great deal of extra effort for no return. I counsel the Government to be extremely careful. I hope that I am wrong, but I think that the obligations on businesses will be onerous and that the regulatory impact statement is optimistic.

Like everyone else, I welcome the simplified formula for the child maintenance premium, the disregard and the working families tax credit exemption. I did not know until the Select Committee took evidence that people receiving working families tax credit who are on housing or council tax benefit are entitled only to a £15 disregard because housing benefit and council tax will take anything over £15. That is likely to create an awful lot of anxiety and a great deal of constituency casework, so we should examine it carefully in Committee.

My biggest worry about the Bill is that, while the Government have been assiduous about trying to work out the cost of a child—although the evidence is pretty thin and they did not manage to persuade me that their calculations were accurate—nobody has looked at the ability to pay. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) also made this point. Paragraph 17 of the Select Committee report and its first recommendation are extremely important. If that recommendation were accepted as an amendment, I would be persuaded to vote for the Bill. The Select Committee recommends that the Government should remove the set formula rates from primary legislation and put them into secondary legislation so that they can be changed if they are found not to be right.

Creating new legal liabilities does not generate new resources. When families split, no extra money is generated. Of course there are people who are swinging the lead, and I want to attack them as robustly as everyone else does, but I do not think that we understand the extent of people's debts. I am talking not about earnings or proportions, but about debts such as store cards and credit cards. Many people have a huge overhang of debt which they cannot cope with, and although, in principle, 25 per cent. of one's income does not seem too much to pay for one's children, for some it is an impossible demand.

The Bill includes draconian methods of enforcement. The chief executive of the CSA plans to reverse the balance of its work from 10 per cent. enforcement and 90 per cent. calculation and assessment so that 10 per cent. of its work will be devoted to calculation and assessment and the rest of the £230 million operation will be put into enforcement. If the CSA enforces the legislation by imposing fixed penalties and taking away people's driving licences, it will create an even bigger bogeyman. It will have to be extremely careful about how it implements some of the measures and make sure that it is not simply recycling money by taking it away from people who are very poor to give it to people who are even poorer. That would not be in anyone's interests.

I should mention two important points that the Government must take on board in Committee. First, to take £5 from people who are on benefit, income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance and to make that a flat-rate payment may be right in principle—it is a difficult judgment to make. However, hon. Members who have not studied the matter in detail may not understand that, when people on income support lose £5, another family on benefit will be even worse off.

Income support levels are not sustainable in the long term and some second families are on income support for years. To take £5 from them and to threaten them with fixed penalties, taking away their driving licences and sending them to prison is contrary to natural justice. We have to keep the position in balance. The proposals can all be justified on paper and in an ideal world they are right. Like everyone else, I want people to get the benefit to which they are entitled, but we have to be careful; otherwise, we might make the situation worse. One third of those who are supposed to be paying the CSA are hiding because the organisation is so inefficient that it cannot find them. If the new, efficient regime works, it will create great difficulties.

The transitional process will be extremely difficult. I want to leave the Government with one thought—hon. Members may be interested in this. One of the most compelling pieces of evidence to the Select Committee came from John Avery, the Deputy Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, who has been on the receiving end of many of those difficulties. I quote from the memorandum that he submitted to the Select Committee. He wrote:

"Simplifying the system should make its administration more straightforward but, even with a simplified system, unless there are enough staff and the staff have the necessary support facilities, training and instruction or guidance, and the time in which to absorb that training or guidance, the problems which have characterised the Child Support Agency's first six years will continue."

That is true. The CSA is facing an increasing case load at the moment. I know that the Government are introducing a new IT system. I support that, and I think that it is necessary to get it in place as fast as possible. However, if we do not put resources into the transitional process in particular and the stage-by-stage evolution of that process is not made absolutely clear to everyone early on so that we have answers to the difficult questions that will come to our surgeries, the transitional process might make the situation almost unbearable.

Finally, even if I objected to nothing else in the Bill, the benefit penalty for contravention of community service would in itself be a reason for voting against it. I cannot for the life of me understand why sensible Department of Social Security Ministers have allowed such nonsense to be included in the Bill. It will never pass the European convention on human rights. The Secretary of State's certificate on the face of the Bill is nonsense. It may be a provision that the Government plan to keep in a cupboard and never use, like the death penalty for treason. Perhaps it is some sort of gimmick, but it does not help. If local authorities started going to lay magistrates—not sheriffs but justices of the peace—and getting the power to take benefits off people who are not turning up for community service, it would be a travesty of justice. There is no other way of describing it, and I hope that the Government will have second thoughts.

7.49 pm

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): I intend to stick solely to the issue of pensions. Individuals have exactly the opposite problems with pensions from Governments. Governments design pension schemes that look good in 40 years' time, but individuals always discover that their pension situation is no good when it is too late to do anything about it. That means that there is a fundamental question of trust that must be resolved, as several hon. Members have pointed out. If the promise of the state second pension is to be believed, the national insurance fund must be protected by independent trustees in exactly the same way as a private pension in order to rebuild trust and to make citizens real stakeholders in their state-provided pensions.

For many years, the minimum pension income guarantee that the Government have introduced will be a more dependable and meaningful part of pensioners' income than the proposals in the Bill. If that continues for very many years, it will destroy public confidence in the proposals that the Government are rightly making. That will be the case especially if the minimum pension income guarantee increases in line with earnings but the state second pension increases only in line with prices. That would produce a gap that would postpone for many years the point at which the state second pension is worth more than the guarantee, which would undermine the whole structure of the scheme. It would also undermine private sector stakeholder schemes, because when people realise that they are saving not for themselves but so that the state may make a smaller contribution to them through the minimum pension income guarantee, they will be angry and demoralised.

The state second pension must, if it is to include carers—which is rightly one of its objectives and one of its strongest features—have at least as generous provision for them as the existing state system. In that respect, we look to the Government to ensure that the existing system of home responsibility protection in the national insurance basic pension is also reflected in the state second pension.

The state second pension has the makings of an excellent product, especially in its earnings-related initial phase. In fact, it is so good that a problem may arise. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said that when it ceases to be earnings related, rebates will be offered that will guarantee—to people on moderate incomes who will be forced out of the state second pension scheme structure into stakeholder schemes—that they will be no worse off. However, if we examine the Government's proposals on rebates, it appears that from the very moment the state second pension stops being earnings related the rebates start

[Mr. Jim Cousins]

to build up enormously. By around 2040-50, those rebates will require a state expenditure of between £12 billion and £15 billion a year to support them, at today's values. When we are told that we cannot afford to increase the state pension scheme, we should consider the cost of the Government's alternatives.

The state second pension scheme is so good that many existing low-paid workers in contracted-out final salary schemes will find that they would have been better off in the state second pension than in their own schemes. The Government have to address that problem and they have two options. One is to force up the benefits of final salary schemes so that they match the benefits of the state second pension scheme for low-paid workers. I understand that the Government are thinking of doing so, and it is important that we are clear about that. The alternative is to allow low-paid workers in contracted-out final salary schemes to opt out of those schemes into the state second pension scheme to maximise their benefits. Those are intricate but important points if these proposals, which contain the basis for a good scheme, are to be credible to low-paid workers in existing final salary schemes.

The stakeholder proposals may assist in a rapid run-down of final salary schemes. We look to the Government to make some proposals that will protect the future of that structure of final salary schemes. That could be done in several ways, perhaps by mixing and matching final salary schemes and stakeholder schemes. The Government must be clear about what they will do before the Bill passes into law.

The Opposition claim that an increasing number of people will be reliant on money-purchase schemes. If that is so, the Government must address the problem of annuities. We are forcing more and more people into an annuity trap that is now acute and that is likely, with the passage of the years, to get worse. If we have low inflation and interest rates, coupled with no gilts going onto the markets because Government finances are in balance and a steady and increasing flow of more private pension pots into the market, annuity rates will be driven down even further. The Government must consider the tax treatment of annuities and whether there is an alternative to the annuity system that will protect the purposes of a long-term tax-supported saving schemes that support people's incomes in retirement.

The Government must also revise some of the tax proposals that accompany the stakeholder scheme. The present proposals allow for contributions of up to £3,600 a year with no link with earnings and net of tax. The purpose of that may be to extend the scheme to carers who have suitable funds, but people in higher income brackets will be able to take advantage of a substantial tax subsidy of up to £3,600 a year for non-earning partners and for children, because there is no lower limit on access to the stakeholder pension scheme and its tax support. From the moment a child is born, its parent could fire into the scheme £3,600 a year net of basic rate tax. It cannot have been the Government's intention to produce such a substantial element of reverse distribution in an overall pension scheme that is heavily focused—rightly—on people with low incomes.

I am unclear what proposals the Liberal Democrats have to make on these issues, but the Conservatives have made it clear that they favour coercing people into private sector money-purchase schemes. That cannot be a sensible approach until we have sorted out the problems of annuities. That is why it is so important that the state second pension scheme that the Bill will introduce is robust enough to become a permanent part of our pension arrangements. It is too dangerous to leave matters so that pensions could be rewritten at a later date. That would undermine public confidence in the whole scheme, as happened under the previous Administration, as would a shift to coercive contributions to private sector-funded schemes.

Above all, when debating pensions we must remember that we should not be trying to find complex, back-end loaded solutions to what are front-end loaded problems. In an important speech just before Christmas, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said that

"the truth is that the elderly population in this country is set to grow in the next 50 years at half the rate of the last 50 years. And the pressures in Britain will be much lower than in many other industrialised countries."

We should take comfort from that.

The people who should be the focus of our deliberations are those who are pensioners now and those who will become pensioners in the next 10 years. They are the people whose years on low incomes have not been supported by any additional pension scheme, and whose few pension rights are so small that they will be caught in the minimum income guarantee system for pensioners—if that system develops in the way that the Government, rightly, intend. We must focus on today's pensioners and pensioners to be, not on those who will be pensioners in 2040 and 2050.

It is therefore extremely important that the Government's proposals for state second pensions will benefit today's pensioners-to-be. It is no use designing a scheme whose very real benefits will be felt only in many years' time. Such a scheme would cause to be forfeit the credibility of the proposals and of the belief that public sector, state-provided pensions will be our best protection, now and in the future, against forced membership of private sector-funded schemes.

I hope that the Government will consider those matters and modify some of the Bill's proposals. The state second pension proposal, especially in its earnings-related phase, is excellent. It could change permanently people's approach to their prospects in retirement and to their activity in the present-day labour market. It could also change their lives as citizens through its promotion of caring for and support of others.

The gains could be huge, but they must be supported by clear proposals to protect the scheme from some of the deficiencies that I have pointed out. If that is achieved, today's pensioners and pensioners-to-be will be able to feel properly covered by the proposals. I hope that the Government will consider some of the matters that I have raised and that we will be able to tease out some solutions in the course of our deliberations.

In constituencies such as mine, there is a restlessness among pensioners and pensioners-to-be. Because of the pensions difficulties of the past few years and the problem of pension mis-selling, they are far more aware of their pension prospects than any previous generation of pensioners-to-be. They are anxious that the Bill will not benefit them in a meaningful way. I hope that the Government are able to respond to their concerns.

8.3 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I listened carefully to the extremely erudite speech from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) and to the powerful speeches from the hon. Members for Northavon (Mr. Webb) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones). They concentrated on pension provision; and although I intend to speak about the Child Support Agency, I want to note that an excellent opportunity for root-and-branch reform of the pension system might have been lost.

The provisions in part III covering loss of benefit are an example of macho politics. They are the stuff of tabloids. They represent populism in extremis and they are legally highly questionable.

I am one of those who believe that the CSA is almost beyond redemption. The ill-fated poll tax was amended three times before it eventually—and deservedly—hit the buffers. Similarly, the CSA is not long for this life either. However, for the purposes of today's debate, I shall accept the second-best position and examine the latest attempts to make the agency work.

One of the basic complaints about the CSA—it is only one of many, I might add—will be familiar to all hon. Members. It is that the formula employed to determine the level of maintenance is complex and too rigid. The proposals in the Bill appear less complex and seem to be far more readily understood. That can only be good; no doubt, absent parents will be able to work out how much 15 per cent.—or 20 or 25 per cent.—of their earnings will be, but commentators in this area have grave reservations about the Bill.

It seems almost bizarre that under no circumstances will the income of the resident mother or of the parent with care be taken into account, regardless of whether that person is very wealthy or on benefit. The Government say that that provision has not been adopted in the Bill because it would be too complicated to include the financial circumstances of that person, who more often than not is female. However, the Australian model, which does take account of that income, works perfectly well. I believe that the Select Committee on Social Security urged that consideration be given to adopting that approach.

Furthermore, there appears to be no upper limit on the amount of child support that can be paid. That will probably affect rich people more than others and does not seem to me to be logical. I believe that earned income should be taken into account. For example, a self-employed father could set up a company and an account and pay himself a dividend from the money earned. Clearly, that would not be right, and proposals to prevent that should be included in the Bill.

It is possible that the Bill will have the effect of reducing child support by about 30 per cent. Would that be good or bad? I believe that it would be bad. Perhaps the Government think that reducing the levy and requiring people to pay less will mean that bad payers will be more likely to pay. I do not know whether that argument holds up or, if it does, where its logic leads us.

I am worried also about the blanket imposition of the CSA jurisdiction on all families. That will undermine and undo settlements that have been reached fairly through the courts. Family proceedings are dealt with in family and county courts. The system is not perfect, but by and large it is equipped to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the parties' respective financial positions. More to the point, it is equipped to assess financial needs after a relationship breaks down, and the needs of the children involved. It is therefore strange that courts should deal with that part of a family's finances, only for the whole process to begin again with the CSA when the level of child maintenance is assessed.

In the past, clean-break settlements have been a useful way of disposing of interlocutory application in divorce matters. They will now be brought into question again. Why should an agreement be reached, or capital given away, if that arrangement is to be torn up 12 months later and the process started all over again?

Many commentators are worried about the way in which the Bill is framed. The Child Poverty Action Group raised a considerable number of concerns. One of them is very important and has to do with families on income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance. The organisation has stated:

> "Although the average level of assessment falls under the new scheme, some poorer 'second' families will find themselves paying more. 68 per cent. of the 150,000 non-resident parents who have increased assessments are on benefit or have incomes of less than £200 a week . . . Other non-resident parents on income support will be liable to pay the £5 a week minimum. This includes those responsible for children in a second family"—

a point made earlier by other hon. Members and on which I shall not dwell. The briefing continues:

> "We understand that the Government wishes to encourage compliance and to ensure that as many children as possible receive maintenance."

That has to be right. It goes on:

> "However, income support/income-based jobseekers allowance fall short of the levels of income required to meet the needs of families."

The briefing then highlights points made in the debate today.

Under the present law, the parent with care is required to authorise the Secretary of State to recover moneys from the other parent if the parent with care is in receipt of income support. That is going to change—probably for the good—but there are matters that must be considered carefully. The parent who authorises—very often, if not always, that parent is female—can show good cause. It is right that the good cause provisions are included in the Bill, especially as there will now be a presumption in favour of collection by the Secretary of State. That will place a burden on a mother at an extremely stressful time, following the breakdown of a relationship. The matter must be handled with great care, and I hope that it will be; otherwise, there is a danger that a person will feel almost harassed in the circumstances.

As always, there are welcome provisions in the Bill, although they may be overshadowed by some of the points I have made. However, I welcome the provisions relating to second families to ensure that youngsters are not treated any differently from the youngsters in the other family unit. The apportionment proposals in schedule 1 are most welcome, as are the shared care provisions. These are important reforms which will rectify several current injustices.

[Mr. Elfyn Llwyd]

On the matter of compliance and enforcement, I rang the CSA in my area last Friday. A young woman had come to see me who was £11,000 in arrears, having not been paid a single penny over the past two years. I spoke to a gentleman who said that he was sorry and that he should have dealt with the case in November. However, he had been in the Scotland Office, dealing with enforcement there. He said that he would do his best to get on with the job. I do not know him personally, and I know few people who work for the CSA. I know that it is a difficult job, and that it is not well paid. However, I urge the Government to give the staff the resources to do the work.

I wish to refer to the "self-employed dodger", of whom I have several in my constituency. Some have disappeared off the face of the earth, while some have been found but still cannot be pinned down. Unless the people are available to do the enforcing, we might be wasting our time this evening and in Committee. I am sure that the question of resources will be looked at again.

The access to income tax returns in this context is a welcome and common-sense approach. I am sure that that will be handled with care, as there must be some civil liberties questions arising from the matter. There are those who want to beat the system, but the system will take them on. That is quite right. I have seen—as have countless others—the dishonest person get away with it for far too long. On the other hand, the hard-working person in full employment who tries to make payments and who was previously assessed at a crippling level has been seen as a soft target. The emphasis may well shift to the dodgy character who is salting money away and trying to avoid responsibility.

There are some practical improvements in the Bill, but there will be thousands of appeals to tribunals. That is almost inevitable. I echo the remarks of the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), who urged Ministers to consider extending legal aid to those who wish to take matters to a tribunal. I am not pleading on behalf of lawyers. I am saying that many people are not sufficiently able to present their case as it should be presented. I am not saying that every appellant must be represented, but we must make it comfortable for those who are unable to argue their case coherently to take the case to a tribunal. If there has to be some form of legal aid in these limited circumstances, let us do it—legal aid is given for far dafter things. I hope that the Government will consider that in Committee.

The spectre of criminal sanctions for civil wrongs may well raise human rights issues. Previous speakers have mentioned that matter, and I shall not dwell on it. However, such sanctions should be used extremely sparingly, if they prove to be legal. I am extremely unhappy about depriving someone of a driving licence in this context, as other persons in the same situation will not face that penalty. Human rights legislation has been mentioned, but I shall not dwell on that point.

I believe that the system should take account, as far as possible, of all the relevant circumstances. That means taking into account each individual's circumstances. If we are talking about imposing a totally rigid, concrete system again, I am afraid that we may be looking at a further review in five years' time.

The Law Society has said that a

"perception of fairness in any new scheme would increase compliance, whereas inflexibility and harsh sanctions may increase the sense of injustice and lead to non-co-operation."

There is some force in that argument.

The Bill appears to be a genuine attempt to right many wrongs. It is far from perfect, and I hope that the matters to which I have referred and the concerns raised in the debate will be pursued in Committee. I hope that the CSA—almost a Frankenstein's monster—can be made more human and user-friendly when the Bill emerges from Committee. However, I believe that that is a tall order.

8.16 pm

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): I thank the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) for his thoughtful remarks on the CSA, and I, too, wish to speak on that subject.

As soon as it was created, it was clear that the CSA would never work properly or achieve its aims in the form in which it was set up. I know that we are starting a new millennium and that we are looking to the future, and I think that we are doing that tonight with these proposals for welfare reform. However, we take our history with us and we should learn from the past.

I speak from my experience as a case worker for a Member of Parliament at the time the CSA was set up by the last Conservative Government. This evening, I thought I almost heard an apology from those on the Conservative Front Bench for the way in which the CSA was set up.

We should not forget how bad things were in the beginning, and the impact was immediate and distressing. I worked for seven years as a case worker, and no other issue in that time came close to the chaotic situation created by the CSA. Our phones never stopped ringing from worried constituents, yet we could not get through to the agency. If by chance we got through, we never spoke to the same person twice and we did not know who we were speaking to. There was no useful information, and the agency did not get back to us.

I do not believe in special treatment for Members of Parliament. I believe in equality—everyone should receive the same service. However, it crossed my mind that if this was how the CSA treated the offices of Members of Parliament, how was it treating the general public? I am glad that proposals for the better use of telephones and face-to-face interviews are part of the reforms.

It became clear that the parents who were already supporting their children and who could be easily identified were being targeted—the easy targets. The assessments often did not make sense at all. We had one case where deduction of earnings was threatened, where the father would have been left with a minus income. It was obvious that the formula for calculating payments was so complicated that the staff did not understand it either.

I am sure that the staff were doing their best, but with such a complex system and duff technology they did not stand a chance of getting it right. Anyone who was

involved at that time knows the litany of problems, such as non-resident parents who received huge arrears demands because the form had gone in and payments were due from that day rather than from when the parent received notification of the amount. The delays caused by the system could be six months or more, yet it was the parents who were penalised. In some cases, forms were lost; in others, people received three letters on the same day saying completely different things. Unfortunately, these problems still arise.

Many people came into the advice surgery close to despair. It was awful. Some parents were no longer able to keep contact and visit their children because of the high payments demanded. My instinct at that time was that the whole system should be abolished. However, having thought about it since, I think that we would have to reinvent that wheel. I certainly do not want to adopt the Liberal Democrat solution of reinventing the wheel in favour of lawyers.

I have always believed that both parents should have responsibility for their children. A child is not a one-night stand—a child is for life, as is the responsibility for that child.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, especially when time is so short. She mentioned one-night stands. Is she aware of the loophole in the current legislation whereby absent fathers who have had children as a result of one-off and clandestine relationships outside their marriage can evade paying any child support? My constituent, Mrs. Jane Jones from Llangan, has not received one penny from her former husband, a wealthy business man, even though a court order was made in her favour in 1992, because the Child Support Agency discovered that he had a child with a prior claim outside the relationship. Under the ludicrous rule of confidentiality, the CSA refused to pursue him. I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that the Bill should be used to remove that loophole.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. That is far too long an intervention.

Mrs. Gordon: I do agree with my hon. Friend. Such a loophole is a disgrace, and I hope that it will be considered in Committee.

The Child Support Agency was dealing with responsible parents, rather than tracking down the irresponsible ones—the opposite of its stated intention. Changes have been made since the agency's disastrous launch, but tinkering at the edges could not solve the fatal flaw of the complicated formula for payment, which tied everyone up in bureaucracy. That is why I welcome the simplified formula. Some may say that it is too simple, but people will know where they stand. They may even be able to calculate their payments, which they could never do in the past. The proposed system is much fairer and, with the use of reliable modern technology, should result in a more streamlined service.

The Bill's first concern is the child. I am pleased that second families will be taken into account, and that stepchildren will be treated the same as second family children. I think that all children from the various relationships should be treated equally—they all have the same needs, and should have the same opportunities. I hope that that will be discussed in Committee.

Unlike my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who is not in his place at present, I welcome the good cause provision. It will ensure that parents who are genuinely in fear of their ex-partners will not be penalised if they do not disclose information. I know that it can, as my right hon. Friend said, be used as a scam. However, when I visited the local women's refuge, I met women who were in deadly fear of their ex-partners. They feared for their safety and, indeed, for their lives, and those of their children.

It is estimated that more than 1 million children will benefit from the new system. Many children live in extremely complicated family structures. The Bill, and the reform of the CSA, will stop more children slipping into poverty. A child does not choose its parents, but bringing a life into the world is an awesome responsibility.

I hope that the reforms will be put in place as soon as possible, although I recognise that they must be implemented properly if they are to work better than the original proposals. I will never forget the introduction of the CSA, the ensuing chaos and the real pain that it caused parents. Many of my hon. Friends on the Front Bench were in this place then, and they have learned from the previous Government's mistakes. I trust them to implement the reforms properly, and to ensure a fair and just system for parents and especially for children.

8.25 pm

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): This has been an interesting and enjoyable debate, and I am pleased to have been called to speak in it.

I want to apologise for anything that I have been involved in to do with the Child Support Agency. I was for two years Parliamentary Private Secretary to Alistair Burt; I listened to what colleagues said about the CSA before it was introduced, when it was introduced, and when we amended it. I am convinced that we never got it right. Having made that admission freely, I have to say that neither has the Bill got it right. It is going down the same wrong road, and I hope in my speech to show how it may be improved.

I am sure that colleagues will acknowledge by common consent that Alistair Burt was a decent Minister, who attempted to do his best. They will also acknowledge that when the Child Support Agency was promulgated, it had all-party support. The things that we worried would go wrong never did. All our predictions were unfounded. We worried about parents with care not wanting to co-operate, but in general they did. The problem was that the amount of money individuals were asked to pay was seen to be too high. People said that the amounts were unfair and that they could not pay. They were complaining not about the formula, but about the amount of money that the Government were attempting to take from them.

My job as a PPS was to go to all the meetings protesting about the measures—my Conservative colleagues were protesting just as strongly as others—and to listen to what was said. The Government responded by making things more complicated, by taking more into account. We tried to move away from a simple formula that we thought everyone could understand—such as the one that the Labour Government want to re-introduce and to establish other disregards. That tended to lower slightly the amount that we were trying to collect. Some cases solved themselves, but the vast majority of people

[Mr. Ian Bruce]

continued to say, "This is too much money—I cannot afford it". By trying to take that extra amount, we ended up by getting nothing for people.

If people can afford to pay £30 a week and are asked to pay £40, they do not pay anything and try to find ways of getting out of the system. They have been extraordinarily successful. According to the figures in the reports, 1.5 million children should be helped by the CSA, but only about 250,000 or 300,000 receive anything and only 100,000 receive the amount to which they are entitled. That shows that the system is not working.

I say to the Minister, with all the passion that I can muster, please, please, please consider what we shall be asking people to pay. For example, let us consider a couple who are probably living right up to their means, who break up and move to separate houses. All of a sudden a guy, who has perhaps left his home, has to find another quarter of his income to pay into the second household. If that was unacceptable and could not be done under the previous system, it will not be done in the future.

The figures are amazing. It is said that the average payment at present is £38 a week. That is derisory. Under these proposals, the amount will go down to £30 a week. What incomes are we talking about, if those are the low figures that are collected? People with an income of £20,000 a year after tax should be paying about £100 a week. Many people will apparently pay very little.

I make the same proposals that I made to my previous bosses—perhaps that is why I ceased to be a PPS—and to the Labour Government when they came to power. I admit my culpability in not realising that the Conservatives were taking the wrong direction—I certainly did not see where we were going. We can tell absent parents that there is a fair amount that they should pay to their children. That amount would probably be between £40 and £45 for the first child, about £50 for the second and about £75 for the third. I suspect that those are the amounts that absent parents would volunteer to pay if they knew that the amounts had been set and that they did not have to fill in a form. They would never have to declare their income; they would never have to tell anyone what they were doing. On the day that they broke up, they would know that they would be required to pay a certain amount. It might be uprated in line with earnings or social security benefits and so on, but that would be the amount that people would pay.

My guess is that people who said that they could not afford even those amounts would still tend to pay a higher amount than the state would allow them to get away with. My suggestion is that by implementing a fixed figure that is seen to be reasonable, we would, at a stroke, get rid of two thirds or three quarters of the CSA's load. The only people who would have to fill in a form would be those who genuinely said, "I cannot afford to pay this, I am making my bid to pay less". Perhaps the percentage of people who had to fill in a form would be the one that Ministers are expecting; I hope that it would be lower. There should be a system that is as simple as possible to assess whether people could really pay. The system should have some flexibility, because people find it difficult to work with absolute formulas.

We know already that many couples who have broken up have given some excuse to the CSA. They do not want to play; they have gone off and made their own deals outside the CSA. People have accepted that. We are about to reopen all the cases in which we bullied people into giving us information. No matter how easy the formula is, some people will always try to avoid revealing their income. It could be that, at the end of the year, the income tax collector will ask people how much their income was after tax. However, that almost begs the question whether people will try to change their income so as to pay less income tax and national insurance. They will hide the details of their income.

I understand that Ministers have been considering the possibility of people not including under income the investment income or dividends that they receive. People with a reasonably large income can generally make arrangements through their employer or switch between salary and unearned income. Thus, they could avoid their liabilities. To have a situation in which there are absolutely no limits, where everyone is to be pursued for every last penny of 25 per cent., or 20 or 15 per cent., of their income will simply add to the work load of the CSA. Surely, we are trying to avoid giving it such additional work.

I plead with the Minister to consider setting a fairly low limit so that we can start to achieve what we set out to achieve out in the first place. Parents should make a reasonable contribution towards their children. However, many people will say, "Hang on a minute. If people are terribly rich should not their children receive more money." That is absolutely right. If I were separated from my wife and my children were still of school age, I would feel duty bound to pay more money than the Government insisted I paid. However, that is what any normal human being should do for his or her children. The Government should merely be involved in setting the minimum amount of money and they should insist that people pay that sum if they can afford it. They should not say that they will continue to increase the figures.

For two years, I had to listen to complaints and interpret them for Ministers. However, I woke up one night and asked whether it would not be better to cut out the vast majority of cases by setting a simple base figure. People were committing suicide but, on average, we were getting only £20 a week from people for child support. That was nonsense, so we should create a practical system that will work.

I am sure that Alistair Burt is not too busy these days, but I suggest that Ministers pay his rail fare, buy him lunch and ask him to consider the proposals in the Bill. He has heard all these arguments in the past, so I am sure that it would be worthwhile to have lunch with him. In fact, if one gave him a £50,000 consultancy—incidentally, I am not his agent—to advise the Government, I suspect that that would mean that a lot of money would be very well spent.

I have not referred to my notes, but I have said what I wanted to say about the Child Support Agency. I now wish to refer briefly to pensions. Again, I am concerned that the Government are going down the wrong route. Governments have proven to be the most unreliable provider of pensions. If one compares what Governments have done to pensioners with what Robert Maxwell did, Robert Maxwell seems a saint. Each time Governments have offered guarantees to pensioners by telling them that

they will receive certain benefits for their contributions, the promises get kicked into touch. What people put in is not in any way related to the money that they get out. We have talked about the contributory principle, but no court of law would suggest that the amount of money going into a scheme and the amount coming out reflected any sort of natural justice. We must consider the proposals for pensions very carefully.

I began work as an apprentice with a limited company and when I changed my job years ago, one had to have one's pension contributions back. We tried to amend the law so that people could transfer their money, but we left a problem for this Government to deal with. When people change their scheme, they try to take too much money and do not put enough into the next scheme. That problem needs to be tackled.

I then went into self-employment, but I am not allowed to continue the pension scheme that I started as a self-employed person. I have to make it paid up and I cannot switch it over. The Government suggested that they might start to do something about that. I also have a limited company that has a pension scheme. I do not take any income from that scheme, so I must have that as a paid-up pension scheme, too. The system is very complicated.

To my mind, personal pensions are the right way to go, but we must understand what mis-selling was about. Pension companies were telling individuals whose employers paid into their pension schemes that they should come out of such schemes and go into personal pension schemes. The companies also charged far more than they should have done. Despite that, it is better for an employer to pay into a pension fund that has the employee's name rather than that of the company on it. That is the right way to go because such a pension can go with a person if he moves from job to job. If the Government try to achieve a funded scheme along those lines, they will do everyone a favour because frankly we cannot rely on the Government scheme.

The Government have to perform a spin trick. If one tells people that they have to pay taxes into their pension, they hate it. If, however, one performs a spin trick whereby people put money into their own savings, rather than paying taxes, they are much happier. If we did that, we could also say that we had reduced taxes and increased savings, which is good from any political standpoint, and that is the trick that we must all seek to perform.

8.40 pm

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, especially after so many thoughtful and interesting contributions.

I shall concentrate my remarks on the Child Support Agency, but I shall first make an observation about war pensions. Many of my constituents work for the War Pensions Agency at Norcross near Blackpool, and I know how hard they work to get assessments right in the first place. I am also aware that sometimes they do not get them right, and appeals are made. I have three constituents who have been waiting months and months to have appeals heard. They are all elderly, and they cannot afford to wait much longer. I therefore welcome the clauses that will speed up the appeals procedure. I hope that my hon. Friends will also consider speeding up the assessment procedure in the War Pensions Agency.

Turning to the proposals for the CSA, I am pleased that hon. Members on both sides of the House recognise the need for change. There is a consensus that parents have a responsibility to provide for their children. When the previous Government set up the CSA, almost everyone agreed with that underlying philosophy. The problems arose because of the practicalities of implementing the legislation. Clearly, there are lessons that we need to learn to make sure that the implementation of this Bill does not lead to the problems that we experienced last time.

The spectre of the CSA has hung over too many people for far too long. The agency has failed the children whom it was designed to help, but it has also caused anger among their parents—more anger than is necessary in the breakdown of any relationship. With the new regulations, we need to encourage parents to work together in the best interests of their children, instead of trying to avoid their responsibilities, as so many do.

We know from earlier contributions that the CSA has almost 1.5 million children on its books, but only around 250,000 are gaining financially from child support payments. As staff deal with up to 100 items of information in each case, huge delays are built into the system. As delays occur, so arrears accrue that non-resident parents cannot pay. When they cannot pay, they do not want to pay, so the whole child support system becomes discredited.

We have to remember that behind all the statistics about the CSA, there are real people whose lives have been blighted. Like many hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, I have dealt with many constituents who have suffered at the hands of the CSA and who come to me out of anger, frustration and desperation. I have met mothers who are totally unable to get any money from the fathers of their children. Some of those mothers have been married to wealthy or self-employed men who have avoided payment but continued to live an affluent life style, thereby not only causing anguish to their former partners but sending their children the message that they do not care. Something must be done about that.

Equally, there are second families where the fathers are paying their CSA assessments. Sometimes they cannot afford to make the payments because they accepted debts, often credit card or loan debts, at the breakdown of the previous relationship. They find that the CSA cannot include these payments in its calculations, but the debts still have to be paid. The CSA produces assessments that fathers want to pay but cannot. Constituents have told me how the CSA has failed them and their children. That is why I am pleased that the Government are proposing radical changes instead of tinkering with the system. Everything that could go wrong with the CSA has gone wrong.

The simplified formula that is set out in the Bill will help staff to do their job more quickly, efficiently and accurately. Soon after I was elected to this place, I obtained a copy of the CSA assessment procedures that the staff have to complete. It took me a long time to read it. I read it three or four times, and I still could not understand it. I have a deal of sympathy with the staff who were trying to make the assessments. I well understand how they made so many incorrect assessments. The new, simplified formula should help them to produce correct assessments at the first stage.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): My hon. Friend has made an important point. At present, the charter

[Mrs. Maria Fyfe]

allows the CSA to take 22 weeks to respond to queries about an assessment. The new and simplified system should ensure that the turn-round is much faster than that. That alone will create a great deal of good will in rectifying injustices.

Mrs. Humble: I agree with my hon. Friend. The new system will help parents to have a clearer idea of how much they should be paying out and how much they are likely to receive. In many instances constituents come to me with complex assessments, not knowing how they have been arrived at. They do not understand why they should pay what they are being asked to pay.

I welcome the proposed £10 child maintenance premium, which together with the maintenance disregard for working families tax credit, will be a valuable tool in the fight against child poverty.

I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), who is the Chairman of the Select Committee on Social Security. As a member of the Committee, I was pleased to take part in detailed discussions. Many people gave evidence to us and many heartfelt representations were made. The majority of those who made submissions in writing or who came to give evidence to the Committee were supportive of the reforms although there were one or two problems with them.

Paradoxically, the problem that was highlighted by the Committee's report and by people who gave evidence to us was that because so many people welcomed the proposed changes, there were concerns that clients under the existing system would feel aggrieved if the transitional period leading into the new system was prolonged. As the Select Committee's report points out, it will be difficult to operate two systems over a prolonged period. That could lead to a sense of unfairness.

I think that we all realise that if we cannot bring everybody on to the new system in one big bang, there must be a period of transition. We must ensure that the new system works if we are to ensure fairness for new claimants and for the old claimants who are transferred. I hope that there will be detailed debates on the Bill and that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Government Front Bench will offer reassurances to existing clients on the time scale that they can expect for the transitional period.

Consideration should also be given to existing claimants who want their cases to be reviewed during the transition period. Are such cases to be given new assessments that will be phased in, or will they be brought on to the new system? We must assure existing claimants that we shall examine such complexities as soon as possible, while doing all we can to ensure that the current system takes care of their best interests, and those of their children, as well as possible under the existing rules.

I recognise that, in part, the problems of the transition period will be resolved only if the information technology available proves reliable. I am no expert in computers and IT, so I listen to the advice that I am given by others. I hope that the new systems being considered by the Government for use by the CSA will be sufficient to deal with the complexities of both the current system and the new system that we propose to introduce. If they are, people will be assured of receiving a far better service than is currently provided.

The new system, new technology and the training in dealing with claimants that staff are to receive are influenced by the changing, more complex family circumstances in which many children are now brought up. The Bill takes careful consideration of shared care arrangements. I welcome its provisions in that respect, in part because I want parents to talk to each other about the care of their children; it is in the child's best interests if apportioning child maintenance helps parents to do that.

I am also aware that the Bill and the preceding White Paper refer to first and second families, but there are many first, second, third and fourth families. I listened with interest to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith). I encountered a similar case, in which a mother applied to the CSA for support, but, on making inquiries, the CSA discovered that the father of her child had fathered another child, and it could not proceed with her application because of the confidentiality of the previous application. The family were left in limbo, despite the fact that the father had a responsibility to both children. I entered into an interesting correspondence with the CSA on that matter.

The Bill refers to children of a relationship who have an entitlement to support. I hope I understand correctly that that means all the children of a father and that any assessments will take into account and apportion the percentage payments across all those children. Dealing with such complex family arrangements is difficult, not only in terms of financial assessment, but when CSA staff talk to people on the telephone. I hope that Ministers will ensure that CSA staff training covers not only the new assessment procedures, but dealing sympathetically with members of the public from extremely diverse family backgrounds. I am sure that issues of confidentiality will be taken into account, but the basic point is to ensure that all children receive their full entitlement.

When the Social Security Committee visited Falkirk, we found that CSA staff were keen to do a good job. They want us to give them the tools that they need. I am sure that we shall do so.

8.55 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It has been noticeable that virtually every Back-Bench contribution has concentrated on one particular aspect of the Bill. I intend to follow that example. It is almost inevitable, because we are really dealing with three Bills. It is difficult to discern any general principle that holds the entire Bill together as a unity.

If the objective is to reduce complexity in the provisions for child support, it is utterly confounded by the complexity heaped on the arrangements for pension reform. If the objective is to reduce pensioner poverty, it is confounded by the arrangements for the minimum pension guarantee, which are almost calculated to deliver pensioner poverty in the future by their diminution of incentives.

I shall concentrate on the provisions for child support. From experience at constituency advice sessions, no hon. Member can be unaware of the magnitude of the social problem that we face. Nevertheless, we continue to have unrealistic expectations of the Child Support Agency.

When I am confronted by a child support case, I am often profoundly affected by the complete absence of any notion of contributory negligence on the part of the

victims themselves when they come to complain to me about the Jezebel or fiend whom they married and about whose behaviour they now complain. The CSA finds itself in the middle, between the warring parties. It cannot satisfy one customer without of necessity dissatisfying the other, yet we continue to maintain the language of "clients" and "customer satisfaction", which is entirely inappropriate.

If the proposed reform delivers its objective by radical simplification of the formula—the objective of administrative efficiency—there will be a huge reduction in the number of complaints about delay, incompetence and maladministration, but that will be accompanied by a vast increase in complaints of another sort—complaints about the nature of the rough justice that will be meted out by the new simplified formula.

Ministers have said that rough justice is better than no justice at all, and I agree, but let us be clear about the nature of the rough justice that will be delivered by the formula. As I pointed out to the Deputy Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration when he gave evidence, complaints about rough justice are not complaints on which he will be able to adjudicate, because they are the deliberate and calculated product of the new simplified system.

I went on to say to the Deputy Parliamentary Commissioner that we should abandon any notion of customer satisfaction, and accept that the agency is never going to be loved and that we might make a virtue of the rough justice by saying

"that it is the proper penalty or disincentive for the condition into which the customer has delivered himself".

That is pretty uncompromising language. The Deputy Parliamentary Commissioner's reply was revealing. He said:

"Whether you should do that I think I have to leave to your own judgment. Have you accurately summarised what I believe to be the dilemma everyone is going to have to face? Yes, I believe you have."

What are we considering? We are saying that dealing with the Child Support Agency on the basis of the simplified formula—the rough justice—is the penalty for being in the condition in which one finds oneself. Other people, who are not in that condition, can afford the luxury of private arrangements and do not have to deal with the agency. In a perverse sense, family break-up and divorce has often been a luxury consumer item reserved for those who could afford it. It is now generally available and the punishment is the rough justice meted out by the Child Support Agency. That is an example of the principle of less eligibility, which was fundamental to the poor law reform in 1834, and is now central to the Bill's reform of the Child Support Agency. I have never shrunk from the principle of less eligibility, but it is extraordinary that so many Labour Members now embrace it.

9.1 pm

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): I want to preface my remarks by thanking the Child Support Agency staff who work in Belfast. Since the new unit was formed, its staff have greatly helped my office and me. They work under tremendous pressure and in difficult circumstances. They told me this week that my number is on their white board as that of a regular correspondent to whom they respond quickly. Other hon. Members have made the point that everybody, not only thorns in the side, should receive a quick response. Nevertheless, agency staff need our thanks because they bear no responsibility for the way in which the agency was set up.

The House should recall that it was unanimously agreed that absent parents should be responsible for their children. That principle should not be taken away. It is an important principle that fathers or mothers who no longer live with their children should continue to maintain them. It would be better if children were maintained out of love, but it is a sad fact of life that, before the Child Support Agency was created, the previous court system did not work. People who used that system encountered many other problems. Liberal Democrat Members should take note of that. They may recall that the previous system was a blunt instrument—blunter than the simplified formula that they criticise. The most crucial problem with the court system was that it provided for no automatic right of appeal, review or update. Every time a change in circumstances occurred, the individual—usually the mother—had to return to the courts. That procedure was not only lengthy, but expensive and extremely onerous for the parents.

I welcome a new, simplified formula. During the debate, we have considered human behaviour and the way in which people respond to one another. That is crucial. The way in which the current formula has been used as an instrument by warring partners against each other has not been raised often. The complexity of the current formula enables people to bat the matter backwards and forwards. The child, who is in the centre, is completely forgotten, such is the enmity of some break-ups. Such children have dreadful experiences—not only a lack of maintenance and support, but being used by their parents. Warring partners will doubtless find new instruments with which to attack each other, but the child should not be an element in that assault.

The child is crucial. The key issue is not whether that instrument is blunt, fair or finely tuned, but recognition of the fact that the child needs, and is entitled to, support. There must be a mechanism for providing swift delivery, which is absolutely essential and can be achieved only by a simplified formula. We could debate for ever whether it is fair to include this or that provision in the formula, or we could make it more complicated again, but we should guard against that because it would return us to the current system. The Government should take note of that.

I also ask the Government to give me an assurance on clause 3, about which I have grave concerns. I understand completely why they want to tighten rules. Warring partners who have parted find themselves in a position where they can abuse the system to suit themselves—not necessarily the children—by claiming that a certain situation exists so that both parties get something out of that system—and income support pays when the father ought to be paying. The problem with making such a change—and I understand why it needs to be done—is that I fear that mothers fleeing violence may not make the necessary provisions to safeguard themselves because they are not in the best mental state to do so.

It is possible to use procedures to make sure that income support application forms allow the mother to consider whether she wants to claim against the absent father, although they do not have to be included in the Bill. Many of us have experience of women fleeing violence, and anyone who has spent any time with such

[Kali Mountford]

women will know that the violent partner will use any excuse to pursue the departing mother and inflict more damage on her. It is possible within such procedures to make sure that we protect mothers. I would like an assurance from my right hon. Friend the Minister of State—if not tonight, at another stage of our consideration of the Bill—that those women will be protected. I do not believe that the Government intend to put them in danger and I expect to receive that an assurance at some point.

We have argued about complexity and non-complexity and whether the complexity of the CSA ought to be carried through to the new system for pensions. It has been alleged that there is a dichotomy in respect of whether we are being consistent, but there is a distinct difference between the complexity that can be used by warring partners and the complexity that might be necessary in a pension system. The current pension system is already very complex, so adding another tier of legislation would create another step and naturally make it more complicated—but does that necessarily mean that the additional layer would in itself be wrong? I would argue that it would not, because there are groups of people who, without the Bill, would have nothing whatever available to them. They would be dependent on income support-related pension schemes, which we now call the minimum pension guarantee, but we must not completely disregard carers who have made a huge contribution—not only to their families, but to society as a whole—by caring for their loved ones. To put that contribution in financial terms, I saw it described as worth £31 million a year, which is a huge sum.

Carers are usually women. They are doing the country a service by caring for people, so it is right to recognise that through a properly funded pension scheme. The second state pension scheme goes some way to achieving that, but I have had a thought of my own, which I have shared with the Minister and the Secretary of State: we should look beyond the Bill and what we want to achieve through it for the future and think about whether we should be considering pensioner provision as a whole. I think we call that joined-up government these days.

An aspect of Government policy that could be readily and usefully translated into pensions law is the provision of personal advisers. Some speakers have commended the idea of a named individual, but the personal adviser could play a special role, which I think the Government should take into account in future legislation. Such advisers could deal with some of the complexities to which hon. Members have referred.

People may not need pensions advisers throughout their lives; there are times when advice should be sought elsewhere. They will receive statements about their pensions, and during their working lives there will be triggers reminding them of the state of pension provision and prompting them to consider whether they should take out further pensions on their own behalf. Shortly before retirement, however, life becomes more difficult—people realise how little time is left and reflect that they may not have made adequate provision.

At present, people are not even claiming all that they are entitled to claim. In that context, benefits advisers have a special role that they are not currently asked to undertake. When people receive their national insurance contributions read-out, about six months before retirement, someone should be saying, "Let's talk about your pension provision. Should you not be claiming minimum pension guarantee?". We are always talking about the take-up of benefits; if we provided advice on benefits at the appropriate time, we could prevent people from falling out of the system and into deeper poverty. That would also be a suitable time for the discussion of other arrangements that such people might be making for their old age.

I urge the Government to consider, for the purposes of future legislation, the tensions that exist between budgets applying to pensioners. I am thinking of the budgets of the national health service and local government social services departments, as well as those of the Benefits Agency. The tension between care and provision is often artificial: in many instances, the restrictions imposed on a call on the public purse relate to a specific aspect of provision, regardless of whether it is within the remit of the Department involved. Pensioners are whole people, and our response to how they are to live out their retirement should accordingly be holistic.

At the turn of a millennium, we must consider changes in social life. Society has changed rapidly over time, and social provision has had to respond to that change. We must now look forward to the rapid social change that we are bound to experience over the next 100 years. For instance, people will live, on average, 30 years longer. Although the Bill may well be adequate in terms of what we are debating today, it will inevitably run out of steam. We should consider how we are to provide a viable old age for people far into the future. If our pensions provisions are to be sustainable, we must have a proper debate about how a diminishing number of people in work are to pay for the increasing number who will be in retirement. At some time the strain will become immense, and the pay-as-you-go scheme may well crack.

We may have to consider other measures, such as an increased working time. I would probably welcome that as I grew older and did not want to retire. Flexibility is another option. The TUC has been considering flexible arrangements for a long time, and, indeed, the Labour party has considered the idea of a flexible decade of retirement. When the Government have completed their work on this welcome Bill, they should continue to look forward to the many social changes that we are bound to experience and reflect on how we are to respond to them.

9.14 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I am delighted to contribute to what is an interesting debate. I shall focus most of my remarks on the CSA, but, on pensions, let me say that the real reason why the Government wish to introduce a state second pension is that they have failed miserably to deliver all the pledges on the original state pension that they made during the last general election campaign. Judging by my mailbag, pensioners in my constituency of Vale of York are hugely disappointed at the derisory increase that the Government announced this year. The Minister might consider that matter before he himself becomes a pensioner.

The challenge that faces the Government is a missed opportunity. They had the opportunity to impose proper reforms to simplify the social security system and they have blown it. Instead, they are introducing reforms that are even more complex than those that continue today. The Secretary of State said that the crux of the problem is twofold. First, calculations are too complicated and take too long to assess. Secondly, corrections are too slow for implementation to take place.

The Minister must put the House's mind at rest as to how the dual system will run in the transitional period. The Government have to satisfy us and our constituents about how the transitional period will operate.

I am hugely disappointed following my correspondence with Baroness Hollis of Heigham in the other place. She said that the Bill would put my mind at rest on the subject of overtime. Neither the comments this evening nor the Bill itself have satisfied me that the Government will take overtime out of the initial assessment. Judging by what constituents have said to me, it is wrong to count overtime—which is, by definition, not a permanent feature, particularly for employees in industries such as construction and engineering and for sales staff, who do overtime before Christmas—as part of overall permanent income. I should like the Minister to rule out the possibility of overtime being part of the overall assessment.

I am slightly concerned that the Government will resort to more telephone contact between CSA staff and constituents, particularly those in Vale of York. Judging by correspondence that I have had and meetings at my surgeries, constituents are not always left with the best impression by CSA staff. That is understandable. We all understand that CSA staff work under huge pressure and are probably understaffed, but there is no excuse for a member of the agency to be rude to constituents. Perhaps some charm school offensive could be undertaken as part of the Bill before the CSA provisions come into effect.

The Green Paper promised that the consultation results would be made public. The Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), will recall her reply to me at the November Social Security questions. She told me that the reason why the correspondence and results of the consultation would not be made public would become obvious when the Bill was published. Can we conclude that those show that the overwhelming majority of people, including me, other Members, outside bodies and many private individuals, such as constituents who wrote in at our suggestion, were against the proposed Government reforms? Is that why the Government are loth to publish the results of the consultation?

I mention the case of Mr. Michael Donaghy in Vale of York, who has been left in extraordinary circumstances. He is not the parent, but is in charge of a boy whom he is bringing up as his own. The absent father, has been making payments, but the CSA informs me that those will stop. Mr. Donaghy will be left with no provision other than his income, which is very modest. I plead with the Minister to reopen Mr. Donaghy's case, as the reforms that the House is considering today will offer him no consolation.

I commend the official Opposition's reasoned amendment, and hope that the House will support it.

9.20 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh), who speaks with great knowledge on the subject. I hope that, in his reply, the Minister of State will say why the responses to the consultation have not been published. My hon. Friend has not only legitimately asked that question, but doggedly pursued an answer to it.

I also have little doubt that, when my hon. Friend talks about the need for a charm school offensive, she had me in mind as someone who might lead it.

This debate has been interesting, not least because the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith)—who has left the Chamber—decided to use it as an occasion on which to name one of his constituents as an adulterer. Tomorrow morning, the gentleman named will undoubtedly have something interesting to read about over his cornflakes.

Like the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay), I am humbled by the breadth of knowledge about pensions on both sides of the House. Nevertheless, what unites all hon. Members is that we are all experts on the Child Support Agency; as a result of our various constituency surgeries, advice centres, advice bureaux—whatever one calls them—we have become very familiar with the agency's internal workings. However, unlike some hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, when I have dealt with CSA staff as a constituency Member of Parliament, I have always found them to be unfailingly courteous and increasingly efficient in their deliberations.

Before I go much further in my speech, I should like to express the regrets of the official Opposition that the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), is planning not to stand at the next general election. Not only will he be greatly missed in the House, but he looks far too young to retire—although he may possibly go on to greater heights. We wish him well.

The Secretary of State said that this legislation is the CSA's last chance. Therefore, it is even more important that we get the legislation right. If this is the CSA's last chance, we shall have to ensure that the proposed reforms work. However, as the Minister's neighbour, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), said, there is much to put right in the Government's proposals.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) reminded us that the original proposals establishing the Child Support Agency enjoyed all-party support. He also told us—it was particularly interesting—that the problems that the House envisaged when establishing the agency did not occur, but that we have encountered an entirely new set of problems. I tell Labour Members—in some friendship—that that is the risk with this legislation.

We accept the need for change, but have to ensure that we do not simply exchange one set of problems for another. Our objective surely must be to ensure that children are supported and that parents accept their duty of financial responsibility for their children.

The Committee—on which I hope to serve—will have the considerable advantage of having the Social Security Committee's report, which I have found to be extremely useful. I should like particularly to draw the House's attention to a very useful letter from Australia—from the family court of Australia and the chambers of Mr. Justice Kay, who offers us just over two and a half pages of advice. I shall quote one sentence which would serve the House well. It states:

"The success of the scheme may well depend on the extent to which the public perceive it to be fair."

I am pleased to see Ministers nodding in agreement.

I believe that children should be treated equally. Sadly, I have to tell my neighbour, the hon. Member for Romford (Mrs. Gordon), that she is wrong and that, under the Government's proposals, children of a second marriage are treated materially differently. The hon. Lady may be

[Mr. Eric Pickles]

forgiven for that mistake because the White Paper offered two options and the Government chose the one under which children were not on an equal footing. I hope that the hon. Lady is selected to serve on the Standing Committee, as we hope to put that right.

Mrs. Gordon: I am concerned that children should be treated equally and I hope that the Committee will consider that point.

Mr. Pickles: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's support. Let me reiterate to the Whip on duty that I hope that she is selected to serve on the Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) warned about the consequences of rough justice. The Government made a virtue of the simplicity of the new system. We are not unsympathetic to that view. Surely everyone is in favour of a simpler system, but removing complexity has a cost. The simpler we make the system, the more we risk individual loss. The Government talk about rough justice, but for some there will be no justice.

Under the basic scheme, one would expect a number of clear exemptions. My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) warned that the number of variations will undoubtedly increase and that, in two or three years' time, it will not be dissimilar from the number of variations under the current system.

The Government refer to a new concept of rough justice. We know that 350,000 parents with care will be worse off by an average of £17 a week. I put that point to the Secretary of State on 29 November at column 4 of *Hansard*. The right hon. Gentleman seemed unaware of that figure. He thought that I was talking about the contributions made by parents without care. So let us assume that the figure of 350,000 is right, as it was supplied by the Under–Secretary, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle). Let us also assume that the Secretary of State's statement that 1 million children will be better off under the scheme is right. So, if 350,00 parents with care will be worse off, assuming that they have an average of 2.4 children, 840,000 children will be worse off by the provisions. Allowing for a margin of error, that is virtually one for one so that, for every child that will be a winner under the new system according to the Government's figures, there will also be a loser. That does not seem to be an improvement in the system. Half will lose and half will gain. The Government need to get their strategy right.

When the Under–Secretary introduced the doctrine, she said that it will be good for everyone if people receive a small sum rather than a theoretical sum. Have the Government not heard of an enforcement strategy and actually making people pay? We are prepared to take away people's driving licences and at some time we will probably take away their passports; why do we not simply make them pay? That seems much more sensible.

Who are the people who will lose? As we are fortunate enough to have Mr. Nicholas Mostyn QC's figures on page 86 of the Select Committee report, we know that those with former partners and who earn just above the national average male manual earnings or the national average male non-manual earnings will be worse off. Those are the people who are going to be receiving a lot less. The people who are going to be paying out, according to Mr. Mostyn, are those who are on well below average earnings. They will see an increase of around 170 per cent. That surely makes no sense. The Government cannot expect support for such a warped and unjust scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) was right when he pointed out how dissatisfied poor people are with Labour.

It is also inequitable to have no upper limit. A measure supposedly designed to help children is nothing more than social engineering. The number of children involved will damage the public's confidence in the reform. It is clearly illogical not to have an upper limit. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why?"] It is illogical because the measure is designed to ensure that children receive maintenance, not to ensure that they receive a share of the parent's wealth. That is a wholly new concept in English law. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members disagree, but it is a topsy-turvy world to create a new concept in English law only for children of a marriage that has broken down but not for children of a marriage that has not broken down. If a child's parents live happily together, he or she does not have a right to a share of the wealth but, if the parents break up, he or she will have that right. Furthermore, there is no way to enforce transfer of that wealth to the child. If the money is spent on luxuries that have no benefit to the child, he or she will have no recourse. It is little wonder that Mr. Alistair Henry, a practising lawyer, has said—in a letter sent to all right hon. and hon. Members, that the Bill will create a world of little Lord Fauntleroys.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that wealthy parents do not transfer a proportion of their wealth to their children by giving them, for example, tax-free donations to their savings or helping them through university? He is talking nonsense.

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Lady has missed the point completely. Parents may transfer wealth to their children of their own volition, but the proposals in the Bill would introduce a mechanism by which non-resident parents had to transfer their wealth to their former spouses, not their children. Financial settlements would be turned on their heads, and that makes no sense. The original recommendation of the Social Security Committee was that there should be an upper limit. My hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) was right to warn of the effect that the proposals will have.

I have already told the House about Mr. Justice Kay's advice that the public must perceive the scheme to be fair, but it will be unfair if the income of the parent with care is not assessed when that person has a higher income than the parent without care. That will lead to great distress and great damage to public confidence in the system. The object is to ensure fair maintenance for the children, not to offer a further means by which wealthy parents with care can damage less well-off parents who do not have care. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid–Kent (Mr. Rowe) was right to say that the system should not be used to extend conflict within the family. Our surgeries are full of people with stories about parents without care, usually men, who shirk their responsibilities and have a life style that is inconsistent with their declared income—they have new Porsches and take expensive holidays—and it is right that we should pursue them.

Increasingly, however, people come to our surgeries with relationship problems. Those people fit the lyrics of the American singer-songwriter Randy Newman, who described "uptown, uptempo women" and "downtown, downbeat guys." *[Interruption.]* The House will understand that I am a well-read product of the '70s.

When a child lives in a wealthy home, there is no justice in a policy that squeezes poor parents without care. That is oppressive and wrong, and we should do something about it. That is why, in the Australian system, if a parent with care has an above-average income, the prescribed figure is reduced dollar for dollar. As Mr. Justice Kay said, public confidence will not be bolstered if it is not recognised that a

"carer is earning Australian $100,000 per annum whilst the payer is struggling to make ends meet."

However, there remains a glaring omission in the Bill—the question of dividend income, which was raised originally by my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts). People who receive unearned income will not be eligible to be assessed by the CSA. There is neither sense nor logic to that.

Conservative Members believe strongly in people having dividend income. We want people to invest, to put money aside and enjoy dividends, but we want them to use the money to pay for their children's upkeep. The Bill offers a Bertie Wooster escape clause. The House will recall that Bertie Wooster led a blameless life, but he had many liaisons and was engaged to no fewer than six females. He was engaged once to Madeline Bassett, Honoria Glossop, Pauline Stoker and Vanessa Cook, and twice to Lady Florence Craye and Roberta Wickham.

What would have happened if those liaisons had been consummated and there had been issue from one or more of them? Wooster was a wealthy man who received dividend income but, under the Government's current proposals, the CSA would not have been able to lay a hand on a penny piece.

Another illustration might involve a plumber who decides to form a company and to take a dividend instead of wages. Under the Government's scheme, he would not have to pay a penny piece, and that surely makes no sense. The Secretary of State has powers to prevent payment evasion and to ensure that those who deprive themselves of a source of income will be liable. However, neither Bertie Wooster nor the plumber could be considered, under the Bill, to have deprived themselves of any form of income. There is much to put right in the Bill's proposals for pensions, to ensure that the interface between the various systems are improved, as the pension industry advises.

Finally, the debate has made clear the House's universal contempt for the idea of removing people's driving licences as a way of enforcing the requirements of the Child Support Agency. It is surely the daftest and most stupid idea ever to come from a spin doctor. I believe that our first job in Committee will be to remove this ridiculous idea.

I strongly urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to support our amendment tonight.

9.40 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): There have been 20 Back-Bench speeches today, and I have heard every one. I missed a few minutes of the speech of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), but I know that it was a thoughtful speech. Some Opposition speeches have been thoughtful, if not always positive. Sometimes, Opposition Members have misunderstood the purpose of the Bill. They concentrated, as did most of my hon. Friends, on the child support aspect of the Bill. No one need apologise for that. Given what has happened recently and the scale of Members' involvement with CSA cases, that is inevitable.

At the outset—this is not meant as a criticism—I wish to refer to any hon. Member who raised any individual CSA case by mentioning the names of constituents. Before I or my ministerial colleagues do anything, we want written information and letters. We are not taking throwaway names in the Chamber and then going away to look up individual cases.

Mr. John Smith: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: No, I will not. I am making that point so that nobody expects that just because someone's name was raised tonight, we will go away and deal with that case. We will not. We will require written instructions from the Member of Parliament.

Mr. Smith: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: No, I will not.

Mr. Smith: On a point of clarification.

Mr. Rooker: There is no need for clarification. I am asking for letters if cases need following up.

I want to respond to some of the points raised in the debate, although it is impossible for me to do justice to all of them. On child support, there were many references to the well-off being required to pay a lot of money because of the percentage assessment—we must make it clear that the percentage figures of 15, 20 and 25 per cent. for one, two and three or more children apply only to net incomes above £200 a week. There was only one oblique reference to that. Anyone earning between £100 and £200 a week will pay a lesser percentage. For anyone earning up to £100 a week, it will be almost a token payment. These are net incomes. Reference was made to a salary of £20,000 a year and a payment of £100 a week.

Mr. Ian Bruce: That is £20,000 net.

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman now says that it is net, but he did not make that clear before. The salary necessary to give a net income of £20,000 a year would be substantially more than £20,000. There are not only fixed percentages—there are built-in hurdles in the system before they are reached.

It is true that there is no upper limit, but there is a limit in terms of the percentage. The limit of 25 per cent. of net income is less than that which can be reached under the present system—under the current system, the limit can hit 30 per cent. of net income. That must be taken on board. It is not possible for us to produce a genuine assessment of losers and gainers, although we have been criticised for that. Given the fact that there is such a default in the current system, it is not possible genuinely to assess changes in people's behaviour.

[Mr. Rooker]

To their credit, the previous Government instituted a cultural change with the introduction of the CSA. It has not worked out as expected, even with the changes. I was present when it was introduced, along with other hon. Members, and the matter was not scrutinised enough. Everyone thought that it was a good idea and that there was a problem to be addressed. There was a general consensus. However, the detail was not looked at properly in the regulations, in Committee or on the Floor of the House. I hope that the details of the Bill will be looked at in Committee.

This time we have the added advantage of greater consultation and the Select Committee report. We have learned from the errors of the past. We are not claiming perfection, but we are claiming that we will have a system that will meet public demands, that will be fair and transparent and that can be operated by our officials.

The hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) spoke about charm schools. It works both ways. I cannot tell my constituents when they are angry and banging on the table, and odd relatives who claim that I set it all up when I was on the Back Benches, that they must be charming when they speak to the CSA staff. One has only to be on the receiving end on the telephone for an hour in a CSA office to realise the sort of things that the public say to the staff. That is why the staff are extremely stressed and turnover is running at 27 per cent. It is not simply a question of not paying them enough—the job is extremely stressful. Part of the stress is to do with the system they have to work with. We hope that the new system will enable them to be more user-friendly, that there will be less stress because of the clarity of the calculations, and that the public reaction will also be different. It works both ways.

I should like to respond to some of the points of the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts). I shall, if time permits, deal with the points on pensions. The general thrust of the hon. Gentleman's message and his criticism of our proposals was that he wanted one law for the rich and one for everybody else. We are not prepared to countenance that. The idea of putting a fixed cap on absent parents is nonsense.

However, we agree that we want the two systems to operate together for as short a time as possible. There must be two systems—there cannot be a big bang. It will not be possible to switch off the system one Friday, to put the existing case load of more than 1 million on the system the following Monday, to accept new claimants from that date and expect the system to work effectively. That will not happen, and we would be irresponsible to suggest otherwise. We want the gap to be minimal, but we have to make it work.

It was argued in a debate on the Queen's Speech that new information technology is required and it will take some time. We regret the delay, but we will not allow the system to operate with the new formula unless we are satisfied that it will work. There is no benefit in rushing it by either three months or six months just for the sake of a headline or to meet any self-imposed dates. This is the last chance for a CSA-type operation, as I am sure all hon. Members will appreciate.

The hon. Gentleman had nothing positive to say about the state second pension which will, over a period of time, benefit more than 14 million people, including 2 million carers and 2 million long-term disabled people who have never had such provision in the past. If we do not change the system, a time will come in the next century when one in three of a much greater number of pensioners—16 million instead of 10 million—will retire straight onto the means test. We must address that now—it is not a question of thinking about 2040. The Government must operate a twin-track policy for tomorrow's pensioners and today's. The same policy will not work for both. The cost implications make that impossible. I just wish that in 1960 there had been a proper consensus regarding pension provision so that we would not now be in this mess, with millions of pensioners living in poverty.

We have to work in the long term, and I accept that Ministers will never be accountable for pension decisions. We have to try and reach a consensus in this House and outside to achieve a system that is fair and justifiable and that will work.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the Minister for interrupting his speech. It has come over on the Press Association tapes that the Home Secretary has said that he is minded to release General Pinochet. Can I ask you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, whether you have received any request that a statement be made by the Home Secretary at 10 o'clock tonight?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I have received no such request.

Mr. Rooker: I shall try to respond to some of the points made by hon. Members, although I cannot go into great detail. We reject returning the issue to the courts as was proposed by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb). After reflection, I am sure that all hon. Members will also do so, although we shall debate the matter in Committee.

The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) said that the new system would lead to high deduction rates. I hope that I have made the point that there is a limit of 25 per cent.—not a cash limit, but a percentage limit. That is fair. However, that will not destroy private arrangements, as he suggested. Partners or parents who want to make private arrangements are free to do so, as long as they do not involve the benefits system. That was the bottom line for the institution of the CSA in the first place.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) thought that the new scheme was already too complicated. He referred to travel costs. We think that they should be taken into account if they are exceptionally high. It is not to say that we shall not treat the Committee stage seriously that I point out to right hon. and hon. Members that we know, from internal discussions and from advice that we have received, that if we move a host of seductively simple, fair and clear amendments to a measure that is—as my right hon. Friend points out—already overly complicated, we shall never make it work.

The formula that we propose is fair; it can be made to work with the existing system and with new information technology. If we start to tweak it in Committee, the evidence, which we shall put before the Committee, suggests that we may not be able to deliver. We are intent on delivering change in the operation of the CSA. I give due warning that any amendments must be carefully drafted and supported by careful arguments.

Several hon. Members mentioned the driving licence provisions. The hon. Member for Havant said that they would not toughen the measure. Indeed, they would. Those provisions would be an alternative to a prison sentence, if the courts did not want to impose one. After all, in most cases, especially for debt, prison sentences are a ludicrous sanction, by any stretch of the imagination. The driving licence provisions would offer the courts an alternative sanction; they will not weaken the measure. Most motorists get apoplexy when their car is in service for a day—

Mr. Kirkwood *rose—*

Mr. Rooker: I am sorry I cannot respond to the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood).

The threat of losing their licence will probably cause them to pay their dues. That is all we ask them to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) asked whether all children in the relationship would be covered by the child support system. Yes, they will. If the payment is necessarily split—for example, if there is a requirement to pay 20 per cent. for the children of two parents—it will be split with 10 per cent. going to each.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford) asked whether mothers should be able to choose to pursue maintenance. We are happy to discuss that matter in Committee, but it is right that, where income support is being paid, parents with care should co-operate, wherever possible, in seeking maintenance for their children. They will have to opt out rather than opt in. However, they will be informed of that when they make their initial claim for income support. It is right to do that.

The hon. Member for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) deserves an answer to her question on consultation, which I know she has put on another occasion. She makes a legitimate point. I have to give her more or less the same answer that I gave her before. However, it is a fair answer—she can check it. A list of the organisations and academics who responded to the Green Paper, excluding those who asked us not to publish their responses, has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, as has a summary of the responses to the written consultations. We have met all requests for copies of those lists, or of the summary of responses.

Of course, an enormous number of the public responses gave confidential information. We do not think that it is right and proper to make such information available in general terms. However, respondents to the Green Paper overwhelmingly accepted the case for radical change. The hon. Lady also made a point about overtime. When overtime is a regular part of income, it rightly should be taken into account.

I wish to make a couple of points about pensions. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is far too much general conversation. In a long and detailed debate, the House should listen to the Minister who is replying.

Mr. Rooker: I apologise for the fact that my speech is not full of rhetoric. I genuinely want to answer some of the points that Members have raised.

We do not think that there is apartheid in pensions. It is true that high earners have no difficulty achieving a decent pension and modest earners may or may not be in occupational pension schemes and have the opportunity to be so. Those who are not will want to choose another option, and that is why we have instituted low cost stakeholder pensions. For low earners, I must tell Conservative Members that it is not tenable to expect carers, disabled people with broken work records and people with long-term low incomes over a lifetime's work to organise funded pensions. That is not possible. By introducing the state second pension, we can virtually double—and, in some cases, more than double—the pension that such people will receive compared with the existing state earnings-related pension.

SERPS was good when it was invented. I was in the House and voted for it when it was introduced in the 1970s. However, because it is earnings related, it does not, by definition, do much for the long-term low paid. It is true that for the average male retiring today SERPS provides about £40 a week; 20 years ago, people complained that they would have to wait all that time for that sum. The time has passed, but it takes time to build up a pension pot.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: I was just about to answer my hon. Friend's point if she will allow me. She made the point that we could use the £4 billion to £5 billion involved in net benefit expenditure on the state second pension for the basic state retirement pension. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave a figure of £5 billion for net benefit expenditure in 2050 on the state second pension. If we were to use the basic retirement pension at the minimum income guarantee level, by 2010 we would be spending £7.5 billion, by 2020 we would be spending about £20 billion, and by 2050 the estimate is that it would cost £50 billion extra in public expenditure. The idea that we could knock off introducing the state second pension in order to fund the basic pension at the MIG-level frankly does not add up. The figures multiply 10 times—from £5 billion to £50 billion—so that idea is not a runner.

Dr. Jones: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Rooker: No, I cannot. I understand that my hon. Friend has volunteered to serve on the Committee, so we can debate these issues there.

[Mr. Rooker]

One or two of my hon. Friends mentioned community service orders, but it is not possible to go into them now. We are dealing with the long-term issues and we are trying to get them right. We do not claim that we can do it all in two years or in five years; we are working for pension provision for the first half of this century. One only has to consider the opportunities that the Conservative party had to get the matter right. In the century that has just finished, the Conservative party ruled the United Kingdom for more years than the Communist party ruled Soviet Russia and it still could not get pensions right for the 21st century.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 180, Noes 340.

Division No. 24] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wiltshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Jacqui Lait and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*

Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Shef'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading):—

The House divided: Ayes 338, Noes 43.

Division No. 25] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hannan, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*

Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe and Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Forsythe, Clifford
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Swinney, John
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and Mr. Phil Willis.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Senator Pinochet

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Are you aware that this evening a statement has been issued by the Home Office in relation to the detention of General Pinochet, and that that statement says in terms that, in the circumstances—that is, the medical recommendations—the Secretary of State is minded, subject to any representations he may receive, to take the view that no purpose would be served by continuing the present extradition proceedings and that he should therefore decide not to extradite Senator Pinochet?

Is it not a contempt of the House that such an announcement should be given to the press and no statement made to the House? You indicated to me earlier, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that you had received no request to make a statement. May I ask you whether it is in the traditions of the House that the Home Secretary—wherever he may be—should make a statement to the House before briefing the press?

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I associate my colleagues and myself as strongly as possible with the request made through you that the usual convention of the House be observed and that Secretaries of State making the most controversial and most potentially provocative public statements on a matter that relates both to their parliamentary duties and to their judicial responsibilities do so first to those who have regularly raised it with them across the Floor of the House?

May I ask that everything be done to make sure that, at the earliest opportunity tomorrow, the Home Secretary comes to the House, apologises to the House, makes a statement to the House and explains what is this evidence that is so conclusive—and how we can have a guarantee in this case that there is not the sort of illness from which people recover very miraculously? In the past, such people have been allowed to escape from judicial process.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You will know that during the 18 years of the previous Government there were many occasions when we protested because statements were not made in the House, so there is nothing unique about what has happened today.

Having said that, and bearing in mind that the Conservatives have said time and again that Pinochet should be sent home, those of us who believe that a statement should be made at some stage are very concerned indeed. We therefore want to put on the record the fact that someone we consider to be a murderous tyrant should face justice and not be sent back to Chile.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I think I have heard enough now.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I call Mr. Howard.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure that we all understand how preoccupied the Home Secretary is at present to press home his attacks on the aggressive behaviour of the people of England, but notwithstanding that, would it not be a mark of respect to the House if he were able to tear himself away from that preoccupation for just a few moments to explain to the House why he has come to this decision now and not many, many months ago? Given the presence on the Treasury Bench of at least one Home Office Minister among the legion of

[Mr. Michael Howard]

Ministers there, would it not be in order for that Minister to communicate to the Home Secretary the desirability of his—*[Interruption.]*

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have heard enough. Right hon. and hon. Members will be well aware that this is not a matter for the Chair. Whether or not ministerial statements are made, and the timing of such statements, are entirely matters for the Government, who will no doubt have heard the exchanges that have taken place here this evening.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough) *rose—*

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I will take no more points of order.

Mr. Garnier *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We must now deal with the money motion.

CHILD SUPPORT, PENSIONS AND SOCIAL SECURITY BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State for or in connection with the carrying out of his functions under the Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums which are payable out of money so provided under any other Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

Sewage and Water (North Thanet)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

10.31 pm

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise, briefly, a matter that is of considerable local importance to my constituents living in the Cliftonville area of North Thanet, and has wider implications—to which I shall return—for the whole coastline and water resources of the United Kingdom.

The provision of water to meet the domestic, industrial and agricultural needs of the 21st century and the disposal of sewage and waste water generated by homes, businesses and industries in growing volume is a vexed question that has taxed many good minds.

Tonight, I shall refer specifically to Southern Water's proposals for the expansion of a sewage treatment plant at Foreness Point, and for the discharge of the resulting millions of gallons of high quality effluent daily, through sea outfalls, into the Thames estuary. I shall seek to demonstrate that that waste of potentially recyclable effluent is something that neither Kent nor the United Kingdom can afford.

First, let me set the proposal in context. Since my election in 1983 I have had a good working relationship with Southern Water, which is responsible for the provision of water to two thirds of my constituency, and for the treatment and disposal of waste water throughout the area. In 1983, Southern Water began a process of planning and investment in a new sewage system for Herne Bay, removed the need to discharge sewage through a short Victorian outfall into the sea, dramatically improved the bathing waters, and reduced the risk of flooding in the town centre.

Much sewerage work has also been carried out in the isle of Thanet. I was proud to see the completion at Foreness Point of the then state-of-the-art marine treatment works, and, on 28 April 1989, formally to declare it open. The construction of that plant had generated dirt and dust, and had caused disruption and inconvenience. My constituents bore the inconvenience with fortitude, in the belief that what was being installed would serve the needs of the area for many years to come, and the construction of an inland treatment plant—inaugurated by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales—consolidated that view. To my constituents' horror, however, fresh demands presented by European directives and regulation have rendered the "new" facility at Foreness obsolete within 10 years.

By June 1994, Southern Water was already examining options for further developments to meet the new requirements. In the summer of 1997, it sought waste water works approval, saying that

"there might be still further development if legislation changes".

Giving formal notice of its intentions, Southern Water stated that the alternative of an inland treatment plant at Weatherlees would be "massively more expensive" than Foreness. Notwithstanding the Department's campaign to

"regard water as a valuable resource"

and insistence on conservation, everything that has taken place since has been driven not by environmental concerns, or by our water requirements, but by short-term financial expedience.

It quickly became clear that there was massive public objection to the Foreness plan on two grounds—the potential desecration of an area of natural beauty and scientific interest; and, perhaps more significant, proposals to pump millions of gallons of what we are told will be

"effluent with a high level of environmental protection"

daily into the sea, when it should be recycled for domestic and industrial use.

The Foreness Point environmental action group, with more than 2,700 members, was formed. Public meetings followed. On 2 October 1997, the Environment Agency (Kent) wrote to the county planning control officer to say:

"The Environment Agency objects to the proposed development as it stands. The environmental statement by Southern Water fails to give proper attention to alternative uses for treated effluent.

No consideration has been given, for example, to options which could contribute materially to the enhancement or conservation of water resources within the Thanet area".

That is the crux of the argument. It has national as well as local implications for every coastal site around the country. Is it right, I shall ask again and again, to waste millions of gallons of water that, inland, would certainly be recycled and re-used?

On behalf of Thanet district council, its planning officer wrote on 25 November 1997:

"The council considers the proposal to be contrary to a wide range of policies within the Kent structure plan and the local District plan . . . The council would draw attention to PPG Coastal Planning where the special position of the coast is recognised and attention is drawn to the fact that:

The coast will seldom be the most appropriate location for developments. Few developments require a coastal location and coastal locations should not be expected to accommodate new development as could be accommodated inland.

In this context it has always been the view of the Council that the most appropriate location for the development, given the extensive size of the site and its relative isolation, should be a further extension of Weatherlees".

However, Southern Water's assessment of the two sites, while giving a "very good" and "good" rating to Weatherlees on planning, environmental and land issues, as against only "average" at Foreness, had given a "very good" financial rating to Foreness and a "very poor" financial rating to Weatherlees. In short, it had become clear that finance was overriding all other considerations.

The then Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), wrote on 6 January 1998 that

"the way we use water is an important environmental issue and the Government is committed to the sustainable use of this resource.

The Urban Wastewater Treatment Regulations (1994) already place water companies under a duty to re-use waste water wherever appropriate".

In July 1998, I wrote to the Minister for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher), asking him to receive a small delegation from the Foreness Point environmental action group. He responded swiftly and courteously, met us and listened sympathetically to our concerns. He made it plain that he, at least, was personally concerned by the environmental issue and the prospects for the conservation and re-use of water—issues that we had raised.

Southern Water's first Foreness plan required land purchase from Thanet district council. True to the position expressed by its planning officer, the council announced on 2 October 1998 its objection to the compulsory purchase by Southern Water of

"land at Foreness Point and the Rendezvous, Margate".

The then leader of the council, Councillor Coppock, said on that day:

"This has little to do with the sale of land and more to do with finding the right solutions for the 21st Century. Only this week it was reported that the Environment Minister, Michael Meacher, had named Thanet as an area of concern for discharge for sewage. This is clearly not an appropriate place for this development and the land is not up for grabs".

I next wrote to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on behalf of my constituents lodging formal objection to the proposed compulsory purchase order. On 5 November, I was gratified to receive a response from my friend the then Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), informing me that

"it has been decided that a local public inquiry will be held to consider Southern Water's application and the objections to it".

As the Minister may imagine, my constituents were elated to learn that, at long last, this issue of vital national as well as local importance was to be fully and properly examined. It was plain, however, that Southern Water wished to avoid exposing the paucity and the venal nature of their arguments to public scrutiny. Southern Water wrote to me, saying:

"As you may be aware additional treatment is now necessary . . . we will therefore be re-visiting our plans to incorporate the necessary treatment processes in line with Environment Agency guidelines and as a result our current compulsory purchase order at Foreness Point is no longer appropriate and we have notified the Department that we will not longer proceed with this".

Therefore, the long-awaited public inquiry fell through. However, by that time, concerns over the future of water provision for domestic, industrial and agricultural use were increasing throughout east Kent and beyond.

Pfizers, the major pharmaceutical company based at Sandwich, had raised the issue, with other structural matters, with Thanet district council in relation to its future investment plans. Farmers were reporting a shortage of water to wash potatoes for delivery to supermarkets. The spectre of a massive house-building programme was raising its head, and serious environmental concerns were being expressed about the salination of the River Stour, as decreasing water flows led to salt water encroaching higher upstream at high tide.

On 3 September 1999, Southern Water's new plan for an even larger scheme at Foreness became clear. In a letter, it stated:

"We are about to submit a new planning application to Kent County Council to install further treatment at Margate Wastewater Works. To house our new equipment we are proposing to extend our Margate Wastewater Works underground".

At a public exhibition held at Foreness Point, on 14 October 1999, it became clear that a second chamber—as large again as the existing one—would be required; that the site would cover 10 acres; that the task would entail massive earthworks, excavation and disruption over a number of years; that millions of gallons of high-quality effluent would still be wasted daily; and that Southern Water still intended to pump raw sewage, during summer bathing season storms and winter storms, through a 300 m outfall into the sea.

[Mr. Roger Gale]

There was, fleetingly, some sign that Southern Water's management was beginning to listen. In response to questions, Southern's project manager said:

"Our preferred option is now Weatherlees . . . we expect to apply for a discharge licence for the Stour next week".

However, on 25 October, Southern backtracked, saying in response to my inquires:

"Developing Weatherlees was reconsidered when research indicated that there was some spare physical capacity which would allow the site to provide the full treatment required for Margate and Broadstairs flows. We made an informal approach to the EA"—

the Environment Agency—

"and the response was so firmly negative that we concluded it would be pointless to pursue the matter particularly"—

and here we go again—

"since it would involve an economic premium over the Foreness Point option".

The Environment Agency, charged with the protection of the environment and its resources, has to its eternal shame once again failed thoroughly to investigate a situation and is instead now sheltering behind the argument that

"we have no discharge licence application from Southern Water to respond to".

Southern Water's own publication, "Working Together to save Water", states:

"We are now using more water than ever before. Compared to only a decade ago more homes are using washing machines and dishwashers and gardening as a hobby is far more popular. These factors are compounded by a steady increase in population.

Added to these man-made challenges are the natural ones. Most scientists are now predicting that the climate change will increase the chance of long hot summers and shorter, warmer winters in the South East. It is generally believed that there will be more exceptionally dry summers like 1995.

If we do not reduce the growth in demand for water pressure on the environment will increase as we need to take more from underground sources and rivers or build more reservoirs.

We at Southern Water take a long-term view and believe that everyone should have enough water for their essential needs for the future.

The development of new sources of supply is often costly in both environmental and economic terms and, therefore, it makes sense to make best use of existing resources before developing new ones".

One of those existing resources is the potential for recycling effluent.

How can it be right, in this day and age, to continue to pump millions of gallons of water into the sea all around the coast of the United Kingdom in the face of the warning that I have just read from Southern Water? Is this to be a long-term or a short-term view?

I began by saying that in 1989 I opened the futuristic treatment plant at Foreness. Since that time Governments and the European Union have changed the rules several times. How long will it be before the EU, recognising that we can no longer go on wasting water, bans sea outfalls entirely?

Will the new proposals themselves be obsolete in a few years and after yet more disruption, leaving us to look inland again and say "I told you so"?

I believe that the Minister is sympathetic to this cause. I believe that, in the national interest, the time is right to hold a full public inquiry into the science, the technology and the long-term environmental impact of the continued use of sea outfalls matched against the opportunity for the recycling of effluent.

It is not a local matter. We have the opportunity to reach a benchmark decision and take a quantum jump into a future for which our children and our grandchildren will bless us as the climate changes.

I believe that Southern Water, and indeed all water companies serving coastal areas, that have enjoyed a proud record of innovation in the past, should abandon what is essentially a 19th century system of outfalls and blaze a trail for tomorrow's technology.

It is clear that Kent county council, while not seeking to shirk its planning responsibilities, has come to recognise that this is not just a local issue, but a national one and would welcome a decision based upon a thorough examination of the facts.

I urge the Minister to call in this application swiftly and equally swiftly to instigate an inquiry so that we can get on with the real job of protecting our environment and providing enough water for the needs of the future that Southern Water and I agree that "everyone should have".

10.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) put his case forcefully and has obviously taken a long-term interest in the matter. I have listened with care to his arguments.

Let me begin by assuring the hon. Gentleman that the Government aim to achieve the highest possible environmental standards consistent with ensuring value for money. We reversed the policy of the previous Government, which could have allowed sewage to continue being discharged into our coastal waters after receiving only primary treatment. Instead, we told water companies in England and Wales that we would require all significant coastal discharges to receive a minimum of secondary treatment. We asked them to install secondary treatment at relevant discharges, including Margate and Broadstairs, as soon as practicable.

We also have a well-established policy to protect identified bathing waters. We have announced a programme for England and Wales designed to raise consistent compliance with the mandatory standards in the EU bathing waters directive to 97 per cent. by 2005, and to achieve a significant improvement in compliance with guideline standards, particularly at major holiday resorts.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, there are a number of bathing beaches along the Thanet coast, including up to eight beaches, from St. Mildred's Bay to Broadstairs, that are affected by the existing discharges at Margate and Broadstairs.

The policy framework means that wherever the treatment works serving the joint catchment of Margate and Broadstairs is eventually located, the standards of treatment applied will ensure that people living there will have a cleaner, safer environment that protects their beaches and the sea from pollution. That is a substantial gain under all circumstances and we should not lose sight of it.

The choice of location of a sewage treatment works serving Margate and Broadstairs is not a matter for Government at this stage. It is a matter for the commercial judgment of Southern Water Services, subject to planning controls and regulation by the Environment Agency. Well-established procedures are already in place for public consultation and scrutiny of the proposals.

The processes—obtaining planning permission, compulsory purchase of land, and obtaining a discharge consent—are subject to public consultation and appeal procedures, including, ultimately, the possibility of appeal to the Secretary of State, should the applications be refused. The Government also encourage water companies to engage in full consultation with local communities about any proposals for new development.

The House will appreciate that it would be wrong for me to make any comment at this stage on specific proposals that might ultimately come before the Secretary of State for determination, but it may be helpful if I set out my general appreciation of the current situation. In so doing, I shall attempt to respond to some of the points that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Southern Water's original intention was to upgrade a treatment works at Foreness point to combine the two existing flows from Margate and Broadstairs. In the light of the Government's requirement for higher levels of treatment, Southern Water revised its original proposals. Those will now require more land—although I understand that there will be no permanent loss of public open space—and additional plant and machinery. The company has applied for planning permission on that basis. I understand that Kent county council will shortly consider that planning application.

The scheme that is now proposed at Foreness point will deliver top of the range levels of treatment, including ultra violet disinfection. The Environment Agency predicts that the new levels of treatment will allow bathing waters in the area to comply with guideline standards under the EU bathing waters directive. It is wrong to imply that raw sewage would be discharged from the new works. It is true that storm overflows, which operate during periods of exceptional rainfall, will be retained, but those would be needed for any scheme, irrespective of its location. They will operate to standards specified by the agency that are designed to protect bathing beaches in the area.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that there is a better alternative for treatment and disposal of sewage from Margate and Broadstairs, at Weatherlees. He has asked for the Secretary of State to call in the planning application to explore more fully the relative merits of the two possible locations.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): My hon. Friend has raised a point on which I have common cause with the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale).

Mr. Gale: This is out of order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. It is not out of order for the Minister to give way to an intervention. If the hon. Member who seeks to intervene had wished to contribute to the debate before the Minister started speaking, the hon. Gentleman would have had to seek permission. He is allowed to intervene and it is up to the Minister whether he gives way.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to you for that advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for North Thanet will be aware that I have common cause with him on certain points of this matter and, in fact, it was my influence with Thanet district council, as a district councillor before 1999, that led to its opposition to the original scheme. I have an open mind about the current proposals, but Weatherlees is in my constituency and my key question now is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I should add to my earlier remarks the observation that interventions should be extremely brief.

Dr. Ladyman: I shall endeavour to be brief, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Environment Agency tells me that it is an open question as to whether the effluent that would go into Weatherlees would cause any harm, but is certain that the effluent that has been proposed for Foreness point would cause no harm. That is the point on which I require clarification.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister should now respond.

Mr. Mullin: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall come to the question of effluent in a moment. The Secretary of State can call in planning applications if he considers that they raise planning issues of more than local importance, but the question of re-use of waste water, while undoubtedly important, is not a planning issue. The Secretary of State would be acting outside his powers to use the planning system to explore that matter. It is for the water company to decide which proposals to put before the planning authorities and the regulator.

Southern Water has discussed informally with the Environment Agency the alternative option of diverting the flow from Margate and Broadstairs to Weatherlees. The hon. Member for North Thanet has suggested that the Environment Agency is not doing its job, because it has not carried out a formal appraisal of the alternative scheme at Weatherlees. In the absence of a formal application for discharge consent and of the scientific information that would come with that, the Environment Agency cannot make a full assessment of the treatment standards that would have to apply. However, it has made some clear and, I consider, persuasive points about the considerations that would apply.

First, the River Stour already carries a very heavy effluent load arising from other treatment works that discharge into it. The plant at Weatherlees already serves a population equivalent to about 89,000 people. The agency considers that those loads already are close to the maximum that can be carried without a risk of environmental impact. Adding the sewage from Margate and Broadstairs would more than double the existing load at Weatherlees. If true, that would seem to be fatal to the hon. Gentleman's argument.

Secondly, the Stour estuary is an environmentally sensitive area. There is potential for impact on bathing beaches nearby, which Weatherlees was originally constructed to protect.

The treatment standards for a plant at Weatherlees would need to be more stringent than at Foreness Point to achieve the same level of protection for the receiving waters. Even well-treated effluent contains micropollutants which, if not dispersed, can have adverse effects on organisms in the receiving water.

[Mr. Mullin]

The Government share the hon. Gentleman's concern to encourage beneficial use of waste water, as does the Environment Agency. In fact, that has already been achieved for several sewage treatment works in the area, but there are difficulties in this case. Water discharged at Weatherlees would add to the volume of fresh water in the estuary but, as I have explained, it would also add to the pollution load there.

If it were to be used for abstraction purposes, the sewage would have to be piped five miles or so up river to be discharged above the abstraction point. That would be in addition to the six miles or so of pipes that would need to be constructed to bring the sewage to Weatherlees from Margate and Broadstairs. I readily concede that that is not an impossible task, but it would add to the expense and complexity of the scheme.

As I said, the choice of location rests in the first instance with Southern Water. The company has told me and the Environment Agency that Foreness Point is its preferred option and that it has decided not to pursue the option of Weatherlees. It will be necessary to test the acceptability of these revised proposals, remembering that they will deliver a higher level of treatment.

In my view, the right option—and I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Member for North Thanet—is to allow this process to run its course without further delay.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 12 January 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Decommissioning

1. **Mr. Jim Murphy** (Eastwood): If he will make a statement on the decommissioning process in Northern Ireland. [103413]

3. **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What progress he can report on decommissioning of weapons. [103415]

5. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): If he will set out a timetable for the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives. [103417]

7. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): If he will set out a timetable for the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives. [103419]

9. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): What discussions he has held with the Taoiseach on matters relating to the decommissioning of paramilitary arms. [103421]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): Decommissioning remains an essential part of securing full implementation of the Good Friday agreement. The Government and the political parties in Northern Ireland agree that decommissioning should begin as soon as possible. The report published on 10 December by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning reaffirmed that, and noted that a timetable for voluntary decommissioning is best agreed with the authorised representatives of the paramilitary groups. I discussed that with the Taoiseach when I met him during the inaugural British-Irish Council meeting on 17 December. I look forward to receiving the commission's next report, later this month.

Mr. Murphy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, and the commitment that urgent decommissioning remains part of the Good Friday agreement; the murder of Richard Jameson is the most recent reminder of why decommissioning is essential. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the people of Northern Ireland that the British Government's opinion is that any decommissioned arms should be destroyed, rather than dumped, and that, if destruction does not prove to be possible in the short term, any weapons that are dumped remain permanently secure?

Mr. Mandelson: The people of Northern Ireland can remain assured that decommissioning remains absolutely central to the fulfilment of the Good Friday agreement. It is not possible to have progress on one part of the Good Friday agreement, but for another to be forgotten. If that were to happen, confidence would simply drain away from all that we have achieved in Northern Ireland.

The methods of decommissioning are for General de Chastelain to determine, providing that the weapons are destroyed or made permanently inaccessible and that there is independent verification of the destruction or the putting beyond use that has occurred. I have great confidence in General de Chastelain and his colleagues to ensure that that process is properly verified.

Mr. Hughes: The Secretary of State must know that, across the United Kingdom, and beyond it, there is huge good will towards the peace process in Northern Ireland. Will he tell us what plans he has—either with the Taoiseach or with other parties in Northern Ireland—to ensure that the process that he has just described, under General de Chastelain, is not only seen to produce decommissioning, but has the community's confidence that that is really happening, and happening now? In that way people will see progress made in every month until May, rather than three months of tension before the final agreed date.

Mr. Mandelson: We can generously understand the reluctance of people in the republican movement to decommission except in the context of an overall settlement. However, that settlement has now been put in place: we have the Good Friday agreement, and that condition has been fulfilled. Therefore, we may reasonably expect, as the people of Northern Ireland do, that decommissioning should now start apace, so that it can be completed within the one timetable—the one deadline—that has been established under the Good Friday agreement, which is May 2000. However, for that deadline to be met, a start must be made. All of us—every party that has signed up to the statement, and the belief that decommissioning is an essential part of the peace process—will want and expect that start to be made very soon.

Mr. O'Brien: I have listened very carefully to the Minister's replies on decommissioning. Does he agree that, in the absence of early and urgent decommissioning, in a free and civilised society, it is wrong to have Ministers of Health and Education who continue to be inextricably linked with a fully armed terrorist organisation?

Mr. Mandelson: No, I do not. If one were to believe that that is wrong, one would question the very basis of the peace that has been struck, the ceasefires that have been maintained, and the normalisation of politics that has been returned, at long last, to Northern Ireland.

I do not think that we should take for granted exactly what has been achieved. On most bread and butter issues in Northern Ireland, we now have, for the first time in

25 years, power back in the hands of Northern Ireland politicians. We also now have an Executive in Northern Ireland who are representative of the whole community in Northern Ireland: there are no longer any outsiders in Northern Ireland politics, which is to be welcomed. Moreover, politics in Northern Ireland are no longer dominated by the age-old constitutional quarrel that has bedevilled them for so long.

Obviously, for those conditions to be fulfilled and for the institutions to be sustained, we need progress on every part of the Good Friday agreement, and that means early decommissioning. That is what I hope and assume will now take place; otherwise, many people in Northern Ireland will feel cheated because one side has not fulfilled its side of the bargain.

Mr. Waterson: Will the Secretary of State accept from me that nobody is keener on peace in Northern Ireland than my constituents, who saw my predecessor, Ian Gow, murdered? However, they have seen hundreds of terrorists released and ministerial portfolios given to those with clear terrorist links. When can they expect something tangible in return?

Mr. Mandelson: We have already seen significant progress on decommissioning. The establishment of the political institutions in Northern Ireland has created a new context in which decommissioning can and should occur. For the first time, all the main paramilitaries have appointed representatives to General de Chastelain's decommissioning body. In December, the general and his colleagues reported that those and other events

"provide the basis for an assessment that decommissioning will occur".

Further discussions are continuing, and General de Chastelain will report again this month. I hope and assume that he will be reporting further progress.

Dr. Godman: With reference to my question concerning the Taoiseach, I am sure that the Secretary of State will agree that there is broad agreement between the two Governments concerning the need for decommissioning to take place on or before the May deadline. In light of the impressive developments that have taken place—to which my right hon. Friend has referred—does he agree that the time has come for the leader of the Ulster Unionist party to give the most serious consideration to a rethinking of his February deadline? If he were to do that, those impressive developments would surely take strong and healthy root in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Mandelson: It is not unreasonable for the process to be put on some sort of probation while progress is made on the implementation of all parts of the Good Friday agreement. Let us be under no illusions: the implementation of the agreement depends on trust being built by all sides and on all sides. It requires reciprocal confidence-building measures, so that everyone can be assured that every part of the agreement is being properly implemented. Therefore, it is not unreasonable that the Ulster Unionist party has the expectation—which is shared by the British Government, the Irish Government, the American Government and all the other political parties in Northern Ireland—that an early start is made on decommissioning.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Is the Secretary of State as concerned as I am that intelligence reports give no indication that Sinn Fein-IRA is preparing for decommissioning within the time scale that we all expect? Does he agree that we cannot go on trying to purchase disarmament by increments? Will he assure us that the ethos of the Royal Ulster Constabulary will be neither diminished nor distorted in order to flatter Sinn Fein-IRA into a process of decommissioning to which it already assented during the Mitchell review?

Mr. Mandelson: I can understand why the hon. Gentleman makes the link between decommissioning and the Patten report. I will do nothing that undermines the ethos or the organisational cohesion of the RUC and whatever police service flows from our implementation of the Patten report; nor will I tolerate any action that impugns the integrity or the professionalism of the police in Northern Ireland. Equally, the police themselves recognise that a fresh start is needed in policing in Northern Ireland so that it is effective and embraced by both communities. Therefore, in implementing the Patten report, we will be mindful of those things, and I will make clear the Government's decisions on its implementation in due course.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): Will the Secretary of State point out to all the people who continually ask negative questions about decommissioning that they are being most unconstructive and ignoring all the positive things that have happened, with peace restored to our streets? They do not seem to have noticed that the main political parties, the official Unionists, my party and Sinn Fein are all totally committed to the full implementation of the Good Friday agreement, which includes the full implementation of decommissioning, demilitarisation and disarmament. We must take the positive view, as all the negativism is only in danger of stirring up trouble.

Mr. Mandelson: How nice it is to see the hon. Gentleman back among us, restored to good health. He is absolutely right: we should give credit for the political progress that has been made. It is easy for some to underestimate the sheer enormity of what has been achieved in Northern Ireland following the breakthrough made at the end of the Mitchell review.

Of course there is no room for complacency, but the fact is that the age-old argument over constitutional issues that has dogged Northern Ireland's politics for so long and resulted in its local politicians being shut out of government for more than a quarter of a century has been ended, and I hope for all time. The issues are now agreed and settled on the basis of consent. That is a major breakthrough and we must do everything that we can to cherish and protect it, whatever pressure it comes under.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I very much hope that decommissioning will work, but will the Secretary of State confirm that it is inconceivable for Sinn Fein Ministers to remain in office if it does not take place?

Mr. Mandelson: I can only repeat what I said to the House before: if there is a report from General de

Chastelain and his colleagues that there is a default on the part of any party signed up to the process—just as would be the case if one of the other parties defaulted in relation to devolution—the Government will take action to suspend the operation of the institutions, as I do not believe that it is right for any party to profit from a default. The whole process would then go back into review and we would do everything that we could to get it back on track as quickly as possible.

Restorative Justice

2. **Kali Mountford** (Colne Valley): If he will make a statement on the development of restorative justice schemes. [103414]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): The experience in many jurisdictions is that restorative justice has a role to play in making offenders more aware of the consequences of their actions, facilitating reparation to victims and allowing reconciliation between offender and victim or between victim and the wider community. It is extremely important that the rights and interests of both victim and offender are protected. Such schemes must be complementary to the criminal justice system, not an alternative to it. Investigation of crime is the responsibility of the police and the determination of guilt or innocence solely the responsibility of the courts.

Kali Mountford: Does my right hon. Friend believe that there are lessons to be learned from the experience of restorative justice for the rest of the United Kingdom? I welcome what he said about the complementary nature of restorative justice: it would not be good for it to take the place of the due process of law. Will he comment on what an important part it plays in returning to a normal social environment and leaving behind the horror of the past?

Mr. Ingram: I agree with all those points. If we are able to get schemes in operation in addition to those that we are already piloting in Northern Ireland and to draw on international as well as British experience, that would further normalisation in Northern Ireland, which I am sure that everyone would welcome.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): Does the Minister agree that some of the restorative justice schemes that are operating in Northern Ireland could be accurately described as alternative justice schemes? Does he also agree that those schemes are operating wholly outside the legal system and involve significant abuse of the rights of the people who are caught up within them? Will he give an undertaking that legislation will be introduced to ensure that the only restorative justice schemes that operate are those that have a clear legal basis, are integrated into the legal system, fully respect the rights of those involved and comply wholly with the letter and the spirit of the European convention on human rights?

Mr. Ingram: The right hon. Gentleman has hit on an important aspect of some of the developments that are taking place outwith the normal process of the rule of law which ignore that important right of everyone—offenders and victims—to the protection of his human rights. Some schemes clearly do not conform to what is desirable, do not recognise the police and, indeed, may not even recognise the due process of law. Such schemes do not fall within the ambit of restorative justice but of a different type of civil administration and are, therefore, unacceptable. A review of the criminal justice system is due to be completed shortly and we will report in due course to the House.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): As the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) said, and whether we like it or not, a perceived vacuum in policing is being replaced by paramilitary actions and their distinctive brand of restorative justice. How long does the Minister think it will be before that paramilitary action is replaced by the rule of law?

Mr. Ingram: It is not just down to those who administer the rule of law—the police, the Government or the criminal justice system—it is also down to the community to recognise the primacy of the rule of law and to co-operate with those schemes that have been defined and conform to the fundamental principles that I enunciated in an earlier answer. *[Interruption.]* I would hope that that could be achieved immediately, but we will continue to work to remove that unsatisfactory and unwelcome aspect of society in Northern Ireland.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I would be much obliged if conversations were a little less noisy. It is difficult for Back Benchers and Ministers to be heard. *[Interruption.]* Order. I am asking for conversations to be less noisy. I can hear what hon. Members are saying, but I want to hear what they say when they are on their feet.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

But does not the Minister think that the many victims of terrorism in Northern Ireland are unlikely to have much confidence in restorative justice when they see what they believe to be clear commitments in the Belfast agreement being altered? How can anybody have any confidence when weapons that were meant to be handed in and destroyed will now be made permanently inaccessible in secret arms dumps that will be known to the terrorists? No weapons will be handed in or destroyed, so they will still be accessible.

Mr. Ingram: Clearly the hon. Gentleman did not listen to the earlier reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. We listened to the hon. Gentleman's question and he should have listened to the reply that was given on the point that he has raised. That issue is a matter for the independent commission under John de Chastelain to verify. It has to provide security on the decommissioning of weapons and we have placed our faith in it. I had understood that the hon. Gentleman's party had done so also.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Does the Minister appreciate that many people in Northern Ireland feel that the principles of restorative justice would

be more firmly founded if those officers of the RUC who issued death threats to Rosemary Nelson were prosecuted and if there was an international inquiry into her murder?

Mr. Ingram: I should have thought that it was much more important that the perpetrators of the crime were brought to justice and that support was given to those who are investigating that crime in order to bring those responsible for such a terrible deed before the courts. I understand the way in which my hon. Friend has framed his question, but he has gone slightly wider than the subject of restorative justice schemes. I am happy to discuss with him further the detail of our attempts to ensure that proper restorative justice schemes are applied in Northern Ireland.

Security

4. **Sir Teddy Taylor** (Rochford and Southend, East): If he will make a statement on the current security position. [103416]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr. Adam Ingram): Over recent months, there has been a marked decrease in the overall number of security-related incidents, and the main paramilitary groups are maintaining their ceasefires. There remains, however, a threat from dissident paramilitaries on both sides who are opposed to the Good Friday agreement.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Although I wish the Government well in their complex and difficult endeavours, is not it a matter of real concern that the killings and beatings appear to be continuing, as we saw only yesterday? Do the Government have clear evidence that the incidence of killings and beatings is being reduced? Will the Minister remind all the parties involved that a sound and stable peace will depend on them all abandoning the Mafia-type violence that has been in evidence for so long?

Mr. Ingram: I am sure that the whole House would agree with the hon. Gentleman's condemnation of that violence. Earlier, I said that there has been a marked decline in the number of such incidents, but even one is one too many. The solution does not lie only with the RUC, the criminal justice process or even with the politicians. The overall society in Northern Ireland must stand up and condemn such actions, give evidence about them and bear witness to them.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): Does the Minister agree that the prospect for maintaining and improving the current security situation would be greatly enhanced by the early introduction of the Patten report? The report's proposals would make the police service more efficient and, most importantly, would allow it to attract greater cross-community support. Will the Minister enlarge slightly on the answer given by the Secretary of State to the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) as to when the relevant legislation will be introduced? Will he assure the House that the Patten report will be implemented in full, and that there will not be cherry-picking to suit the positions of political parties?

Mr. Ingram: The Patten report examines new ways to deal with policing in Northern Ireland, and the importance of that was recognised in the Good Friday agreement. The report is in the public domain and there has been a long consultation period on its contents. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, he will address the House on the matter in the next few weeks.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): Does the Minister accept that the murder of Richard Jameson this week illustrates very clearly that the terrorist threat is ever present? Will he therefore give the House a guarantee that there will be no reduction in armed forces levels, or any other security changes, unless the Chief Constable and the Army's General Officer Commanding believe that any such change would be safe?

Mr. Ingram: First, it would be proper to sympathise with the family of the victim of that tragic incident. As for the on-going development of the peace process, we hope that no more such crimes—ones that groups devoted to terrorism, paramilitarism or some political process seek to justify—are committed.

As to the future, assurances have been given time and again that reductions in levels of security will be threat-dependent. Decisions in that regard will be made according to the best available advice.

Mr. MacKay: I wish to return to the deeply regrettable murder of Richard Jameson. If the Chief Constable informs the Minister that the Ulster Volunteer Force was responsible, it will be clear that that group is no longer observing the ceasefire. In those circumstances, will the Minister guarantee that no more prisoners belonging to that organisation will be released from jail?

Mr. Ingram: As we have advised the House time and again, the whole question of prisoner releases is kept under constant review. That would apply in the circumstances that the right hon. Gentleman describes.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the enormous confidence that exists in the work that he has done for demilitarisation in Northern Ireland? The reduction of British troop numbers, the closure of vehicle checkpoints and the opening of the border can only help to improve confidence in the security situation there. Should not my right hon. Friend make greater use of what has been achieved in that regard to encourage people to think positively about decommissioning, as the British Government are carrying out what they said that they would do? Would it not be better to talk about the Government's positive achievements in Northern Ireland than to indulge in the nit-picking approach displayed by the Opposition, who appear to want to set back the whole peace process?

Mr. Ingram: The very principle underlying the points made by my hon. Friend were of course set out in the Good Friday agreement. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State published shortly before Christmas a paper setting out the way forward for the normalisation of the security profile, which it says is dependent upon the level of threat. Any further security reductions,

which have been considerable over the past year and a half, will be dependent on the best security advice available at that time and in the future.

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I am sure that the Government and the Minister will join me in condemning the tragic murder of Richard Jameson in Portadown. Given that last year the Government determined that the IRA ceasefire was intact following its murder of Charles Bennett, what confidence can we have that the Government will apply standards that can be upheld in determining whether a ceasefire has been breached in respect of the murder of Mr. Jameson? Can we have any confidence that the Government will act in those situations to halt the early release of terrorist prisoners?

Mr. Ingram: The hon. Gentleman has been very vocal in his opposition to early releases, but a court assessment has found in favour of the Secretary of State's judgment in terms of the quality of the ceasefire of that particular terrorist group. We continue to monitor the actions of those who are so engaged; judgments are made, and we have shown that we will act resolutely and firmly, based on the evidence that is provided to us on the best security advice available.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [103443] **Mr. John Heppell** (Nottingham, East): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with the families of the seven fishermen who are missing at sea off the Isle of Man. Our profound sympathy is with them all.

Mr. Heppell: May I say what an honour it is to ask the first question of the millennium? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I only hope that it is not the last.

Is the Prime Minister aware of the reports of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and of Saatchi and Saatchi showing that after two decades of Tory Government, we had the worst poverty record in the developed world? But my right hon. Friend will be reassured to know from the Saatchi and Saatchi report that at least the Tories were embarrassed about it. Under this Government, 170,000 jobs have been created under the new deal. In my constituency, youth unemployment has been reduced by 75 per cent. When does my right hon. Friend expect the Leader of the Opposition to be embarrassed about the lack of support for measures that directly tackle poverty? Or is the Tory party now so extreme as to be incapable of embarrassment?

Madam Speaker: Order. I am sure that the Prime Minister will select from that question the section which relates to his responsibilities.

The Prime Minister: Delighted to do so, Madam Speaker. The new deal has meant that 170,000 young people have gone from the dole into work, into unsubsidised jobs. There are tens of thousands more.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Rubbish.

The Prime Minister: It is a pity that the Conservative party opposed the new deal, but it always has opposed measures that reduce unemployment and help people who are poor. I met some of these young people yesterday. For the first time in their lives, they have some hope, confidence and prospects for the future. I hope, just for once, that the Conservative party will stand up for unemployed people.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): First, may I associate the Opposition entirely and sincerely with the Prime Minister's remarks about the missing fishermen?

Turning to the Government's responsibilities, when the World Health Organisation says that this country's preparations for a flu outbreak have been among the worst in Europe, when people have had their cancer operations cancelled for the fourth time, and when families of relatives who have died say that they are angry with the Government for saying that the national health service is coping, does the right hon. Gentleman stand by the remarks of the Secretary of State for Health—that the NHS is coping well?

The Prime Minister: Let me read out what the chairman of the British Medical Association, Dr. Ian Bogle, has said:

> "All parts of the health service have been put under pressure, but doctors and nurses are coping well, from GP services to intensive care. Thanks to the high level of planning across the country, we are coping."

As the right hon. Gentleman has opportunistically sought to make capital from this matter, let me point out that half the patients currently in intensive care have illnesses related to flu. Some 600,000 people attended accident and emergency units during the Christmas period, a rise of 32 per cent. Accident and emergency admissions were up 13 per cent.

I agree that there are real capacity constraints, and we need more doctors, nurses and intensive care beds. For precisely that reason, we are putting extra investment into the health service. I said that the right hon. Gentleman was being opportunistic because he has opposed that investment.

Mr. Hague: Why does not the Prime Minister wake up and recognise that the system is not coping for some people? That is the fault not of hard working doctors and nurses, but of a Government and of Ministers who did not prepare for the winter. Why did the Prime Minister not

listen last night to the daughter of a woman whose operation had been cancelled for the fourth time? On the news, she said:

"I think it is about time Tony Blair started to realise the reality that NHS hospitals are facing on a day to day basis. The Government is trying to cover it up by saying that hospitals are coping, but they are obviously not."

The situation has been made worse by the Prime Minister's broken promises and by his political distortion of clinical priorities. He has become another Labour Prime Minister saying, "Crisis? What crisis?" If the NHS is coping well, will he give us the statistics for which we asked a month ago? How many people are waiting to see a hospital consultant, and how does that compare with the figure when the Government came to power?

The Prime Minister: I am surprised that the right hon. Gentleman has attacked the waiting list pledge, as a result of which we have reduced in-patient waiting lists by 80,000. I have outlined previously what has happened on out-patients, but more are being treated than ever before. I do not for a moment dispute that the pressures on the health service as a result of the flu outbreak have been serious. Half our intensive care beds are occupied by people with illnesses related to the flu.

I also accept that there are genuine capacity constraints, and that we need to build capacity. Let me once again tell the right hon. Gentleman the facts about what we are doing. Since our campaign to bring more nurses into the health service, 2,600 nurses and midwives have returned to employment. A further 2,500 nurses and midwives are undergoing practice courses to return. As a result of the increase in pay that we gave to starter nurses last year, there has been a 24 per cent. increase in the number taking degree courses this year. Applications for midwifery training have risen by 50 per cent. Four hundred more cancer specialists and 400 more cardiac specialists are in training.

All those things take time—three years to train a nurse and seven for a doctor. It takes years to build hospitals. The difference between the Government and our predecessor is that we recognise the constraints in the health service and are tackling them. Our job is to modernise and improve the NHS, while the right hon. Gentleman's proposals involve privatising a large part of it.

Mr. Hague: Does the Prime Minister have the courage to give the information that I have requested? We had the first question of the millennium from the hon. Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell); can we have the first answer from the Prime Minister? Some 248,000 people were waiting to see a consultant when he came to power, and there are 512,000 now—VIPs and ordinary people, as his friend Lord Falconer would probably put it. The only thing that has risen faster under the Government is the cost of political advisers. Does that not tell us all that we need to know about a Government more interested in style than in substance, in making promises than in delivering on them, in blaming others than in taking responsibility—and more interested in spin doctors than in real doctors?

The Prime Minister: I notice that not a single fact of what I said did the right hon. Gentleman dispute. While we are being lectured by the Opposition, let us not forget that, under the previous, Tory Government—*[Interruption.]* Let me give them the figures: 40,000 beds had been cut, when we came to office; nurses in training had been cut; and spending as a percentage of national income had also been cut.

I have done some research on the right hon. Gentleman's time as Secretary of State for Wales—this is the man who lectures us. In his time as Welsh Secretary, he cut the number of doctors; he cut the number of hospital beds; and he cut the number of nurses, midwives and health visitors.

As for "real" doctors, the extra doctors in training are real, the extra nurses in the health service are real, the extra £21 billion is real. Let us never forget that the right hon. Gentleman's policy is to make sure that everyone with a non-urgent operation has to take out private health insurance. That is not the answer to the health service. Yes, there are problems, but the choice is between modernising and rebuilding the health service under us, or privatising it under the Tories.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Is it not important that we consider the experience of other countries which are suffering from the same flu epidemic? Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the United States of America, which spends twice as much on health as we do, but in a largely private health system such as the Opposition are proposing, is struggling, as are we and other European countries? That is despite the fact that, in the States, up to a third of the beds in many hospitals are normally vacant. They still cannot cope with the extra cases. Is that not a lesson for us as regards the foolhardiness of Tory policies?

The Prime Minister: That is precisely why we shall not implement them. If I might expand on the remarks of my hon. Friend, there were reports in *The New York Times*, during the past two days—*[Interruption.]* I was going to read them out in response to further questions from the Leader of the Opposition, but I never got any. In *The New York Times*, for example, it was reported that the wave of flu has become widespread, overwhelming emergency rooms, filling hospital beds, and forcing postponement of operations. In many overcrowded rooms, people are simply leaving without being treated. In Ireland, hospitals in Dublin and around the country were forced again to cancel almost all routine surgery and procedures. In Sweden, all the intensive care facilities are full; some non-urgent operations have been cancelled and closed-down wards are having to be reopened. Elsewhere—in Italy, Norway, Germany, France and Switzerland—there are huge problems as a result of the flu outbreak.

Having said all that, let me return to the point: we accept that there are fundamental capacity constraints in the national health service; we are working to tackle them. However, the way to tackle them is not what is being urged on us by the Opposition, who say that private health care will take the strain. It simply will not. The only alternative is to get money and reform, over time, into the national health service—and that we will do.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): As the Prime Minister does like to keep his promises, does he not have to admit that his promise to save the NHS is, in the depths of the current crisis, looking very threadbare indeed? As he is recommending—correctly—more money for the NHS,

will he make it his priority not to go ahead with another Tory-style tax cut in April, but to give that money to the health service instead?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman needs to co-ordinate his remarks with those of his economic spokesman, who attacks us for putting up the tax burden. Let us get it straight; either we decide that we shall put in the extra investment or we do not—it has to be paid for. We are putting in extra investment. We said that there would be two tight years, and there were, because we needed to sort out the financial deficit. This year is the first year of substantially increased funding. Next year will be the same. The year after that will be the same. If we carry on running a stable economy, we shall get the extra resources for a good three years after that. Already, next year, the proportion of national income spent on the health service is to rise to more than 6 per cent. for the first time. I accept that, meanwhile, there are people suffering and not getting the care that they need in parts of the health service, but it must be done stage by stage, over time, in a way that is consistent with the proper running of an economy.

Mr. Kennedy: Going back to the issue of promises, may I ask the Prime Minister about another matter—his promise to pursue an ethical foreign policy? Does he support the Foreign Secretary and the International Development Secretary in opposing the resumption of the sale of arms to Pakistan until democratic guarantees are in place, or is he going to support the Department of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Defence, which appear willing to put profits before conscience?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman's question is based on a misunderstanding since, as far as I am aware, there is no dispute between Government Departments. The same rules will apply as apply to any arms sales, but as far as I am aware, there are no proposed sales taking place.

Mr. James Wray (Glasgow, Baillieston): I know that it is outwith the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister, but I should like him to assure the House that there will be a fair and just decision regarding the entry to Britain by Michael Tyson. I am appalled by the way that the four candidates for London mayor have used Mike Tyson as a political whipping-boy, and I am concerned regarding the economic effect that it will have on hoteliers and the service industry in Manchester.

The Prime Minister: Anyone would be ill advised to use him as a whipping-boy. I know of my hon. Friend's long-standing interest in boxing, but the matter is being dealt with by the immigration service, and it must deal with it according to its rules, in the normal way. That is the proper thing to do—to play it by the book.

Q2. [103444] **Mr. Keith Simpson** (Mid-Norfolk): The Home Secretary has described the English as very aggressive and violent. Does the Prime Minister agree?

The Prime Minister: That is a complete misconstruction of what the Home Secretary said. I say this as one very peaceful English person to another—*[Interruption.]* Well, I was born in Scotland but brought up in England—I am delighted to say—and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree with the Home Secretary that the last thing that we want is a resurgence of English nationalism. I am British, and proud to be British.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): The Prime Minister's Government has, since May 1997, dealt with many of the bad policies that we inherited from 18 years of Tory rule. Will he look at an issue that is causing housing problems in many parts of the country—the fact that we treat VAT on new build totally differently from VAT on improvements and repairs to our housing stock? Is it not time that we had parity, to enable us to deal with our housing in a better way?

The Prime Minister: I think I should treat that as an early Budget submission and leave it to the good offices of the Chancellor.

Q3. [103445] **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): Is the Prime Minister aware that in Sussex the bodies of my constituents are being transported around the county, from overflowing hospital mortuaries, in vans that are normally used to transport rubbish to the local tip? Is he aware that the only reason we have any empty intensive care beds is the lack of staff to attend to them; or that at Worthing hospital, where we already have some of the longest waiting times in the entire country, all elective surgery has been cancelled, affecting particularly harshly my many elderly residents?

Will the Prime Minister now apologise to my constituents and to all the NHS staff who have been caused great distress and suffering? Will he apologise, rather than continuing to con them with these soundbites about the NHS never having been better than under Labour?

The Prime Minister: What I said was that there were real problems in the national health service, and that we were tackling them. For example, there are 100 more critical care beds, which include intensive care beds, this year than last. In all parts of the country we are trying to bring in more doctors and more nurses, but as the hon. Gentleman's constituents would know, it takes time to train doctors and nurses and we are tackling these problems.

Mr. Loughton: How much longer?

The Prime Minister: It will take time, but the hon. Gentleman should remember, when he is talking about waiting lists, that waiting lists are now 80,000 below the level that we inherited from the Government whom he supported.

Q4. [103446] **Ms Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster, Central): As my right hon. Friend will be aware, child poverty trebled under the previous Government. Is he also aware that the Child Poverty Action Group estimates that, within two years, 800,000 children will be lifted out of poverty as a result of this Government's initiatives? However, the Child Poverty Action Group warns that more may still need to be done to abolish child poverty altogether within

20 years. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that Ministers are aware of these findings and work together closely to achieve the target that he has set?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that the Child Poverty Action Group has indicated that our policies will indeed lift children out of poverty. That helps to correct some of the reports published recently that were mainly based on statistics up to the time we came to office. As a result of the working families tax credit, the minimum wage and the increased child benefit, we will lift a very substantial number of children out of poverty. That is only the first step. The other thing is to make sure that we carry on the new deal, so that we carry on giving work, hope and opportunity to young people.

It is appalling, but true, that every single one of those policies was opposed by the Conservative party. Indeed, last week, it made it clear that it was opposed to the minimum wage. People will go into the next election knowing, if the Tories win, that if they have a minimum wage, it will be taken away from them; if they have the working families tax credit, it will be taken away from them; the extra child benefit will be taken away from them and the new deal will be scrapped. Only someone with the misjudgment of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) could have that as his election programme.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Can the Prime Minister tell the House what Blairism is?

The Prime Minister: It had its first outing on 1 May 1997 and resulted in an election victory and a majority of 179.

Q5. [103447] **Ms Margaret Moran** (Luton, South): Does my right hon. Friend recall a year ago the constant dire warnings from Conservative Members of the adverse effects of the introduction of the national minimum wage? Job losses and worse were predicted. Will he now confirm that independent reports have indicated that the national minimum wage has given 2 million people increases in their pay packets, and there has been an increase in employment of 130,000? Indeed, in Luton, we have seen a drop in youth unemployment of 67 per cent. and large employers, such as Whitbread, have thoroughly welcomed the minimum wage and say that it was introduced well and without any adverse effects. Does my right hon. Friend agree that all that suggests that the verbiage from Conservative Members on the minimum wage is about as reliable as their verbiage on tax?

The Prime Minister: Employment is up by more than 700,000 since the election and long-term unemployment has halved. That is an excellent result. My hon. Friend is quite right. The minimum wage has not had any of the adverse impacts that were proclaimed by the Conservative party. The truth is that Conservative Members opposed it because it was an act of fairness. What they do not understand is that, in a modern economy and modern society, fairness and prosperity go together.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): On Monday, the Prime Minister's official spokesman said of a particular promise that the right hon. Gentleman had made:

"The commitment he has made . . . still stands."

That was about the Prime Minister's promise to hold a referendum on proportional representation in this Parliament. So when are we having the referendum?

The Prime Minister: As I explained the last time the right hon. Gentleman asked me about this, as a result of the Jenkins report it is not possible to have a referendum on that particular proposal prior to the election. However, our commitment still stands and the debate goes on.

Mr. Hague: It was a very simple question, and the Prime Minister said earlier that he had the answers to my further questions. Before the last election, he said:

"We have made it clear all the way through that we are committed to a referendum and we are committed to it as part of our programme for the next Parliament".

The Government's annual report says that item 130, which is a referendum on voting systems, is "on course." When will that happen? As the Prime Minister has now consulted the whole Labour party on that matter, will he tell us what the result was?

The Prime Minister: We said that we would have a commission, which has looked into the matter and reported. We shall of course abide by the commitments that we have made.

Mr. Hague: Has the Prime Minister seen the Home Secretary's comments? I shall have to turn to another page of my notes for them, but they are well worth waiting for. He said that the results of Labour's grassroots consultation exercise on the voting system, which showed a five-to-one majority against change,

"pretty accurately reflects the mood throughout the party towards PR".

Does the Prime Minister agree with that, and if so, why does he not now get on and hold the referendum so that the Conservative party and the Labour party can campaign together against this whole crazy idea?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is certainly looking for the issues on which he can unite with others. As for the Home Secretary's comments, I find them extremely interesting. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] That is a compliment.

As for the Leader of the Opposition's strictures on the Labour party, I shall offer him some advice. I would bother less about the Labour party than about the party that he is leading. It is not surprising that he wants to give me advice about the Labour party when the biggest queue is the one to get people out of the Conservative party. I think that he realises that, in future, although he will no

doubt look for all sorts of cross-party issues, he should look to managing his party before he seeks to manage mine.

Q6. [103448] **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster** (Hastings and Rye): Further to the earlier exchanges on the NHS, would my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the staff at the Conquest hospital in Hastings, who, faced with a doubling of emergency admissions over the past three weeks, have achieved the outcome that no one in need has been turned away? In welcoming the significant increase in funding that has made that possible, will he treat with contempt the whingeing by the Tories, who ran down the NHS when they were in power and whose big idea now is more about offering privatisation than encouragement to the staff who are working so hard?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right to say that as a result of extra investment the NHS will get better—I am delighted that that is happening in Hastings—but there is still a long way to go. Hospitals, particularly in some inner-city areas, are still coping with enormous pressures, and we must relieve them.

My hon. Friend is also right to say that the key issue is the distinction between the policy that we have and the Conservatives' policy. I shall again quote the Conservative health spokesman, who said of the Tories' plans:

"What we are proposing will revolutionise private health care. What we are starting is perhaps a Trojan horse because with the patients guarantee, most of them haven't thought through the implications of what we are doing."

We have thought them through. They mean that anyone facing one of a number of non-urgent operations, including cataracts, hernias, and hip replacements, will be forced to take out private health insurance. It is impossible to do that, and the Tories go down that path because of their tax guarantee. They say that they will cut taxes in any set of circumstances. That is the biggest example of their lurch to the right and is part of the new extremism of the Conservative party. Hon. Members should not take my word for that; they should take the word of certain Tory Members. Their tax guarantee means that the Tories know that they cannot pledge to spend more on the health service.

I say again that, for all the difficulties in the health service that we are working on, the choice is clear—modernise it or privatise it.

Q7. [103449] **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): Given his professed commitment to freedom of information and the fact that there is no reference in the legislation or the regulations to any such power, how does the Prime Minister justify the Government's decision to prevent local parents from seeing the list of feeder school ballot petitioners in Ripon?

The Prime Minister: I do not know the answer to the detailed question, but I am perfectly prepared to write to the hon. Gentleman to give him it. The real difference between the system now and the one before is that, previously, local authorities could decide to close these schools, but now the decision is left to parents by ballot. I may say that no such school has been closed.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): The Prime Minister earlier referred to people suffering. He must be aware that there are many today shivering in misery, with despair deep in their bones, who feel that they have no future and who turn their faces sadly to the wall. Can he offer balm of Gilead or some soothing words to the Conservative party?

Madam Speaker: Order. I made a new year's resolution to be much nicer to my colleagues, but I will not allow the Prime Minister to respond to that question.

Senator Pinochet

3.31 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the circumstances of his decisions in respect of General Pinochet.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): The current position is as follows: Senator Pinochet was arrested in London on 16 October 1998, pursuant to a warrant issued by the fifth central magistrates court in Madrid, and he has been held since that date on bail.

On 14 April 1999, following the second judgment of the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords the previous month, I issued a second authority to proceed in respect of offences of torture and conspiracy to torture alleged to have been committed by Senator Pinochet after December 1988. On 16 May last year, Senator Pinochet's solicitors applied for permission for a judicial review of my decision. The state of Senator Pinochet's health was not among the grounds advanced by his legal representatives.

At the hearing on 27 May 1999, the application for permission for judicial review against me was dismissed. The extradition hearing took place between 27 and 30 September at the Bow Street magistrates court. On 8 October, the Bow Street magistrates committed Senator Pinochet on all charges to await my decision on surrender.

Reports about Senator Pinochet's medical condition were taken into account by me in taking both decisions on the authorities to proceed, but at those stages I had no reason to doubt his fitness to stand trial. Since the authority-to-proceed stages, Senator Pinochet has not made direct representations to me about his medical condition. However, on 14 October last year, representations were submitted by the Chilean embassy, attaching recent medical reports on Senator Pinochet. They suggested that there had been a recent and significant deterioration in his medical condition.

I have a clear legal duty to operate the Extradition Act 1989 in full. In the light of the information from the Chilean embassy, that duty included involving myself in and informing myself fully of the true facts about Senator Pinochet's health. I therefore asked him to undergo a thorough and extensive medical examination, to be undertaken by an independent team of clinicians. Senator Pinochet gave his consent. He was entitled to the usual patient confidentiality, and he has chosen to exercise that right. He did however agree to the disclosure of the report to me and to the United Kingdom prosecuting authorities.

On the advice of the Government's chief medical officer, I appointed a team of clinicians of outstanding national and international reputation. Its members were Sir John Grimley Evans, professor of clinical geratology of the university of Oxford; Dr. Michael Denham, consultant physician in geriatric medicine at Northwick Park hospital; Andrew Lees, professor of neurology at the national hospital for neurology and neurosurgery in London; and Maria Wyke, a consultant neuropsychologist. It was established that none of them had any inappropriate personal interest in the case. Their medical examination of the senator took place on 5 January this year. My officials received the team's report late on 6 January. I considered it with advice over last weekend.

The unequivocal and unanimous conclusion of the three medical practitioners and the consultant neuropsychologist was that, following a recent deterioration in the state of Senator Pinochet's health, which seems to have occurred principally during September and October 1999, he is at present unfit to stand trial, and that no change to that position can be expected. I have therefore told Senator Pinochet's legal representatives that, subject to any representations that I may receive, I am minded to take the view that no purpose would be served by continuing the present extradition proceedings.

I have written formally to the Crown Prosecution Service as representative of the kingdom of Spain, to the Government of Chile, as well as to France, Belgium and Switzerland, each of these three countries having outstanding extradition requests before us. Letters have also gone to a number of human rights organisations, inviting them to submit any further representations that they consider that I should take into account, and to do so within the next seven days.

Throughout these proceedings, I have not been able to make any oral statement to the House because of my quasi-judicial role in respect of extradition matters and because of the sub judice rules of the House. I have always made it clear that I would make a full oral statement when the matter has finally been resolved, which of course I shall do. Meanwhile, I must maintain an open mind on this matter, including the representations that I may receive. I hope that the House will understand that until the matter is finally concluded, what I can say is bound heavily to be circumscribed.

Miss Widdecombe: Although I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, may I draw his attention to the widespread concern, which is shared on both sides of the House, that we had to learn of this important decision from the press late last night, and not from a statement from himself to the House? Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us why it was necessary for us to learn of these matters from the press, bearing in mind that it was not through any leak but rather through a formal Home Office statement, which could surely have been made by a Minister to the House?

Secondly, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that at all stages throughout these proceedings he has had the discretion to take the medical condition of Senator Pinochet into account? Will he tell us when a magistrate first commented that Senator Pinochet was unable to attend court? Will he explain why, at that stage, he did not commission the sort of report which he has now, at the final stages, commissioned?

Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what the cost of this entire business has been? He must realise that there has been an immense expenditure of public money, of time and of effort—there has been anxiety on all sides of the argument—in a situation that will result in the end in the senator probably being returned to Chile, which could have happened at a much earlier stage had the right hon. Gentleman had the decisiveness to approach the issue properly? Will he accept that from the start this matter has been handled in a bungling and incompetent way, and

that at the end of it no one is satisfied? Spain is not satisfied, Chile is not satisfied, and the British people have been put through an awful lot of expense for no result whatsoever.

I shall be interested to hear from the Secretary of State exactly what this seven days means. [HON. MEMBERS: "A week."] It probably does not mean a week. Will he confirm that, if a legal challenge is mounted in the next seven days, the proceedings could go on well beyond the week in question, and that Senator Pinochet could continue to be held in this country for some time to come? When the Home Secretary talks about seven days, he is not giving the real position.

Will the Secretary of State tell us how on earth he has managed to come to a series of such conflicting decisions in so many cases recently? He arrested Senator Pinochet when the senator was in bed recovering from an operation; by contrast, he let a suspected Nazi war criminal walk out of this country even before the police investigation had been completed. Furthermore, even when he had the clearest possible admissions, he took no action in respect of cold war spies. Does he have any grip on his Department? Does he have any consistency? Does he have any logic? Is not he dealing with this matter in the most shameful way for a man of his high office?

Mr. Straw: The right hon. Lady asked me a series of questions, and, subject to what I said in my statement, I shall do my best to respond to each of them. On the issue of the statement last night, as I have already explained, because these matters are still under consideration by me in my quasi-judicial role and because of the sub judice rules of the House, it has not been the practice—nor, I suggest, could it have been—in these extradition proceedings or in any other for there to be a sequence of oral statements to the House about the decisions that have been made. That has been accepted by the House and has been the practice of previous Home Secretaries and Home Office Ministers for very good and understandable reasons.

From a personal point of view, that has been frustrating, because I have always been ready to come to the House to make oral statements whenever the need has arisen. I would have preferred to do so in this case.

A major distinction should be drawn between the decisions for which a Home Secretary is responsible in other areas and those for which he is responsible in a quasi-judicial capacity. It is inevitable in this process that the parties to extradition proceedings must be informed of decisions before Parliament, and therefore the public, can be informed. We had to inform the parties last night. It was my hope and intention that a proper written statement, which would also have been reported to the House as a written statement, could have been made this morning. Not because of any direct action by the Home Office, but because it emerged late last night that the news of my decision in this case—that I was minded to complete these extradition proceedings—was about to be made public, I deemed it appropriate to issue the statement last night. Otherwise, there would have been considerable confusion about the matter.

The right hon. Lady asked whether, at all stages, I had a discretion to take the senator's medical condition into account. At all stages I have been under a duty to take all circumstances into account in respect of the senator, including his medical condition and any representations that have been made to me about it.

A full estimate of the cost of the extradition proceedings cannot be made until the matter is finally at an end. There are currently legal proceedings still before the High Court.

I am surprised that the right hon. Lady did not properly appreciate the fact that we are signatories to a number of conventions on extradition, including the European convention on extradition. It was her Government who passed the Extradition Act 1989, which imposes the clearest possible duties on any Secretary of State, on the Government and on other law enforcement authorities in respect of extradition requests from states. It is to her great discredit that she suggested that it was I who ordered Senator Pinochet's arrest; that is not the case.

Finally, the right hon. Lady asked what "seven days" meant. "Seven days" means seven days during which I am able to consider representations. The outcome remains to be seen, because although initial and final decisions about authority to proceed are made by the Secretary of State, the extradition process is also subject to legal proceedings. That is the nature of the process in this country, and it cannot be changed in respect of any individual application.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Is it not significant that, in all that barrage of questions, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) expressed no concern for the victims of the terror of Pinochet during his years in office, when he was ready to deny justice to thousands? Because of that, we must be a model of justice in this respect—as, indeed, I believe my right hon. Friend has been.

Does my right hon. Friend's statement imply that he believes Senator Pinochet has a veto over who receives copies of his medical report? Surely representations can only properly be made by the interested organisations if they have full sight of the report. The interests of justice will be met not by a self-serving disclosure to only the Home Secretary and the Crown Prosecution Service, but by disclosure to all groups with an interest in the case, including countries that have sought the extradition, and bodies such as Amnesty International which have intervened. If they are to make proper representations, they must have the full medical facts.

Mr. Straw: In this case, as in all other extradition cases, I have sought to follow the rule of law and to make decisions as fairly and carefully as possible. I have followed the same procedure in respect of the medical report as I have in respect of other extradition applications. I was advised that, at this stage of the proceedings, the question of to whom the report could be submitted—other than me, and the United Kingdom prosecuting authorities—was a matter for Senator Pinochet.

As for representations by other interested parties, I am bound—not least by section 12 of the 1989 Act, but also by a wider discretion—to take into account all representations made to me. That applies both to representations relating directly to the senator's medical condition—I have before me a full, thorough and independent medical report—and to representations relating to other matters.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I entirely appreciate the Home Secretary's

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

quasi-judicial position, but will he tell us on what legal basis—the 1989 Act, or common law—his prospective decision will be made, if he proceeds as he has suggested that he will? Also, will the decision that Senator Pinochet may be unfit to stand trial be based on evidence that not just the Crown Prosecution Service, as the prosecution authority, but the Spanish Government, as the authority requesting extradition, should be entitled to see? It was the Chilean Government, with the assent of General Pinochet, who asked for the medical matters to be taken into consideration.

Without going into more detail, can the Home Secretary tell us whether it is a question of the senator's mental or physical health? Can he tell us specifically whether the test of unfitness to stand trial that applies in this country is the test that would apply in Chile if the senator returned there? In any event, can he confirm that, whatever his final decision, it will not alter the decision of the courts last year that heads of state are not immune from either prosecution or extradition if they have committed offences such as those of which General Pinochet has been alleged to be guilty, and on the basis of which the extradition has been sought?

Mr. Straw: In response to the hon. Gentleman's first and last questions, I and any other Secretary of State have to take decisions in extradition matters on the legal basis of the Extradition Act 1989, the extradition conventions to which we are party in so far as they are regarded as forming part of our domestic law and the weight of judicial authority, including last year's decision by the Appellate Committee of the other place in respect of the applications.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about fitness to stand trial, it is a decision for me and has to be so, given the stage that has been reached in the extradition proceedings. Among the criteria that I took into account were whether the senator would be in a position to follow the proceedings, to give intelligible instructions to those representing him and to give a coherent statement of his case, and of recollection.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I vehemently support the careful and, indeed, impeccable way in which the Home Secretary has gone about the matter, but, in a personal capacity—not as chairman of the all-party Latin America group—may I say that many people in the continent of South America, many of whom have cause to loathe Senator Pinochet and what he stands for, will nevertheless think, rightly or wrongly, that the decision should be made not in Madrid, not in London, but in Santiago? Will the Home Secretary take that into consideration?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he says about the way in which I have dealt with the matter. I hope that I can continue to work in that way until it reaches a conclusion. As for his other points, of course I note what he says.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): May I express my appreciation that the Home Secretary did eventually sanction the medical examination of Senator Pinochet? He will be aware that I represented to him on 24 and 26 November my concern about the senator's health. In his consideration of the representations that will be made, will he bear in mind at all times the interests of the people of Chile? Is it not true that Chile is now a democracy in every sense of the word? It is conducting an impeccable presidential election campaign. Have not the Chilean people and the Government whom the newly elected president will have the honour of leading the right to put the matter behind them and to look to the future with hope and every confidence?

Mr. Straw: On the hon. Gentleman's first question, I note what he says about sanctioning the medical examination. I was aware, of course, of his interest in the matter. I did ensure, as did my officials, that we proceeded as speedily as possible in the complicated process of identifying and assembling a team of independent expert clinicians and then getting them together to make the examination.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point, I have set out—for example, on 15 April 1999 in the *Official Report* of the House of Commons—the considerations that I took into account when I issued my second authority to proceed.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): I offer what limited support I can to what has fallen from the Home Secretary. Those of us who made common cause with him at protests and vigils immediately after the murder of Allende and the nightmare that followed in Chile know that he personally has nothing to prove to himself, to the House or to the international community when it comes to expressing opposition to that regime, but will he reflect on what has been achieved as a result of what he has done and the steps that he has taken in the past 15 months? That odious man has effectively been tried in an English court—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] I shall deal with Conservative Members' comments in a moment.

The man's crimes, and the infamy that he has committed, have been revealed in that court, and that court has found in the clearest possible terms that, in respect of those crimes, he has the clearest possible case to answer. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ask a question."] The court has found as a matter of law—

Madam Speaker: Order. I ask the hon. and learned Gentleman to ask his question now. Other hon. Members are seeking to ask questions, and a full statement follows this one. May I have a question now for the Home Secretary?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: My Lord—*[Laughter.]* Madam Speaker, my question is this: does the Home Secretary believe that the case has revealed a very dark side to Conservative Members? Does he agree that, although there are honourable exceptions among them, the case has emphasised the fact that hon. Members sit on two sides in the House?

Mr. Straw: My hon. and learned Friend and the House will forgive me if, in the light of my comments on my quasi-judicial role, I do not follow him.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Although I join my right hon. and hon. Friends in welcoming the fact that the Home Secretary now feels minded to bring this

unfortunate fiasco to a conclusion, will he confirm that the matter could drag on for months, and that that sick man could be detained in the United Kingdom for many weeks and months? Will the right hon. Gentleman give the House some indication of how long the process is likely to continue?

Further to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), is it not true that every political party in Chile has said that they should be entitled to resolve the matter, and that the matter should not be usurped by the British Government, the British Parliament or the British courts?

Is it not bizarre that the Government seek reconciliation between white and black in South Africa, and Jew and Arab in the middle east, and even invite us to sit down with republican terrorists in Northern Ireland, but deny the people of Chile the right to reconcile their differences there?

Mr. Straw: For the reason that I gave to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall–Andrews), I shall not respond directly to the hon. Gentleman's comments—if he will forgive me—except to say that, on the issue of the time scale, I have not only endeavoured to secure but have secured a situation in which, after receiving the original reports from the Chilean embassy, I acted as quickly as I could consistent with fairness and care in the case. I shall continue to do that, as I recognise that Senator Pinochet and his representatives would be anxious to secure a conclusion to the matter as quickly as possible.

I have to take fully into account all representations that I may receive. In this type of decision, I am subject to review by the courts, and I cannot anticipate whether that will occur.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): When the Home Secretary comes to reach his decision, will he consider this aspect? Last year, Britain fought two wars against brutal dictators; many innocent people died, and it was justified on humanitarian grounds. Now, we have someone before us charged with the brutal torture of people, but, apparently, the Home Secretary is minded to release him on humanitarian grounds. Is it not a fact that, whatever judicial considerations have to enter his mind, it is a political decision? If he takes it in such a way as to release that man, it will undermine the ethical foreign policy and the argument that law should be the basis of international relations, and also throw some doubt on his long-held view on applying the fast-track principle of justice when offenders come to light.

Mr. Straw: While it is perfectly possible for people to make representations to me on humanitarian grounds, in this particular circumstance I have come to my preliminary conclusion—that the senator should not be extradited to the kingdom of Spain—on the narrower grounds of his unfitness to stand trial on the basis of the medical evidence that I have received, which is different. Where representations are made to me on wider grounds, I will consider them fully before coming to my final decision.

I must part company from my right hon. Friend when it comes to his assertion that these decisions are political decisions. They are not easy decisions, but I believe that successive holders of my office have sought to exercise the responsibilities placed on them by this House in a quasi-judicial way and to weigh up the facts of each of these and similar cases and the legal duties upon them. That is precisely what I have sought to do in this case.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am sure that Members on both sides of the House are aware that, from time to time, this country has had to welcome the leaders of Governments who have been responsible for genocide, terrorism and killings in their own country. However, that is not the point that I wish to make.

Bearing in mind that the medical experts appointed by the Home Secretary have found unanimously that the life senator General Pinochet is not fit to face trial, why has the right hon. Gentleman delayed taking a decision—subject, of course, to the decisions of the courts of law in this country—that it is his recommendation that Senator Pinochet be allowed to return home to Chile, where if the people of Chile wish to judge him, it is their duty and responsibility to do so and not that of this country or of Spain?

Mr. Straw: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, it is hard to lay the charge of delay against me. The medical report was undertaken on 5 January, and it was received by my officials late last Thursday, 6 January. I received the report on 8 January, when it was in my weekend box. I considered it, and made decisions on the matter over the weekend. My preliminary decisions were communicated to the senator's representatives and the other interested parties yesterday. The process has taken, altogether, five days. I do not think that it is appropriate to categorise that as delay.

If the hon. Gentleman is asking me why I have made a preliminary decision and not a final one, it is on the basis of clear advice that I have received, not least because there are other parties to the proceedings who are bound to be entitled to make representations to me before I reach a final decision.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Bearing in mind that the law in Chile is such that it is most unlikely that Pinochet will be tried for crimes against humanity, despite what was said earlier, I should like to ask my right hon. Friend the following question. Is there not a danger that the wrong kind of message will go out to every mass murderer and torturer around the world, including Saddam Hussein, that the time will come when they, too, having lost power, will not be brought to justice? If Pinochet could be brought to justice in Spain, would not that be the different type of the lesson that we want all those mass murderers and torturers to learn—that there is no escaping from their crimes?

Mr. Straw: I understand the concerns that my hon. Friend has raised, but I hope the message that goes out is that this country is one which follows the rule of law.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Does not the Home Secretary feel that the public interest would have been better served had he returned General Pinochet to be dealt with by the democratically elected Government of Chile? Is it the Home Secretary's case that General

[Sir Norman Fowler]

Pinochet's medical condition deteriorated as a result of his detention; or is it possible that he was never medically fit to stand trial at any stage?

Mr. Straw: I took into account the consideration that the right hon. Gentleman invites me to take into account, and that was made clear in the decisions that I set out in full in the *Official Report* on 15 April 1999; but, judging the matter as a whole, I came to the view that it was right to issue the second authority to proceed, and that decision was acknowledged to be within my authority to make when the divisional court of the High Court decided not to entertain an application for a judicial review of that decision made by Senator Pinochet's solicitors.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the nature of Senator Pinochet's deterioration. As I said in the statement, the unanimous and unequivocal conclusion of the three medical practitioners and the consultant neuropsychologist was that there had been a recent deterioration in the state of Senator Pinochet's health, which seems to have occurred principally during September and October 1999.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): May I, too, commend the sensitive manner in which my right hon. Friend has dealt with this complicated matter? Did he hear the Chilean ambassador on the "Today" programme this morning, suggesting that, if he were returned, Senator Pinochet could well face prosecution in Chile? Will he bear that in mind when weighing the medical evidence that he now has against the assertion by the diplomat that Senator Pinochet may recover in the next few days or weeks?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful for what my hon. Friend says about the way in which I have conducted this matter. On the Chilean ambassador's remarks, the question whether the Senator is fit to stand trial has to be considered on the basis of the evidence before me and in accordance with the law of this country, not that of Chile.

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): For most of the past 15 or so months, General Pinochet has been kept in Surrey. The security, housing, policing and other costs must be enormous. How much is being spent, and who will pay? The ratepayers and council tax payers of one county would be being treated very unfairly if the bill fell on their shoulders alone. If Surrey is to pay, will the Home Secretary ensure that it is suitably compensated?

Mr. Straw: As I explained in answer to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), it is not possible to give a final assessment of the cost until the proceedings have been concluded. I will certainly write to the hon. Gentleman with as much information as I can. It has also always been open to all hon. Members to table parliamentary questions for written answer about the current, up-to-date costs, and that can continue to be done.

As for the costs falling on the Surrey constabulary, it is open to any police service to make an application to the Secretary of State if it feels that it has borne a special cost beyond the normal contingencies that police services have to bear; those are considered sympathetically—that will be done by the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) and myself—and are sometimes accepted and sometimes not.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the Home Secretary. We shall now take the statement.

Armed Forces (ECHR)

4.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the outcome of our review of the implications of a judgment by the European Court of Human Rights as it affects the armed forces.

The House will recall that, on 27 September 1999, the European Court of Human Rights delivered its judgment in a case brought by four ex-service personnel of the United Kingdom armed forces who had each been discharged on the grounds of their homosexuality. My predecessor issued a statement at the time making it clear that the Government accepted the judgment of the court—as British Governments have always complied with such rulings—and that we would be studying carefully the implications of the decision. He also announced that those cases already in the system—that is, personnel in the process of being discharged on grounds of homosexuality—would be put on hold.

In the light of the court's decisions, it was clear that the existing policy was not legally sustainable. We accordingly asked the Chief of the Defence Staff to set in hand an urgent review of policy in that area. That review has now been completed, and I am able to announce the outcome today.

Our starting point has been to develop a revised policy that preserves the operational effectiveness of our armed forces, respects the rights of the individual, and takes full account of the court ruling. The chiefs of staff accept the need to change the existing policy and have been fully involved in the process of developing a revised policy. I have discussed the subject with them on a number of occasions. They have endorsed the outcome of the review.

We have drawn on the experience of other countries—in particular, Australia—and have taken account of the last formal study of the subject in the United Kingdom, undertaken in 1995. Moreover, we have reflected the court's conclusion that legally we are obliged to adopt an approach that regards sexual orientation as essentially a private matter for the individual.

There is, of course, no doubt that the armed forces are a unique institution and occupy a unique place in our society. We expect a lot of them. They cannot choose the people they work and live with, often in difficult, cramped conditions and for sustained periods. Operational effectiveness depends on team cohesion and the maintenance of trust and loyalty. As a result, standards of behaviour are imposed on members of the armed forces that can be more demanding than those required by society at large. That is why we need a code of conduct to govern the attitude and approach to the personal relationships of those serving in the armed forces.

The code will apply across the forces, regardless of service, rank, gender or sexual orientation. It will provide a clear framework within which people in the services can live and work, and it will complement existing policies, such as zero tolerance towards harassment, discrimination and bullying. I emphasise that we are not tightening the rules on heterosexual relationships.

The code is not an abstract legal document full of rules and regulations. It has been developed by service experts who understand fully the operational needs and day-to-day practicalities of the armed forces. Personal relationships do not ever lend themselves to precise prescription and the code recognises explicitly that

> "It is not practicable to list every type of conduct that may constitute social misbehaviour".

Therefore, we have placed at the heart of the code what we call the service test, set out in the following terms:

> "Have the actions or behaviour of an individual adversely impacted or are they likely to impact on the efficiency or operational effectiveness of the Service?"

In using the code, commanding officers will have to apply the service test through the exercise of their good judgment, discretion and common sense—the essence of command and the effective management of people. I am arranging for copies of the code to be placed in the Library of the House.

The ECHR ruling makes it clear that the existing policy in relation to homosexuality must change. As all personal behaviour will be regulated by the code of conduct with the object of maintaining the operational effectiveness of the three services, there is no longer a reason to deny homosexuals the opportunity of a career in the armed forces. Accordingly, we have decided that it is right that the existing ban should be lifted. As no primary or secondary legislation is required, with effect from today, homosexuality will no longer be a bar to service in Britain's armed forces.

A range of briefing material is being issued to commanding officers to explain the code of conduct and to give them detailed guidance on how it should be implemented. That makes it clear that the chiefs of staff commend the principles of the new policy and are committed to ensuring that it works.

I recognise that there may be some concerns within the armed forces and elsewhere over this new policy, but I believe that the changes I have described offer the best way forward in terms of providing an approach that maintains operational effectiveness, is within the law, and recognises the rights of the individual.

Implementing the changes successfully will be a challenge for leadership at all levels in the armed forces, but such challenges are not new, and all three services will be equal to the task. With the commitment which is in place from the very highest levels of the chain of command, I am confident that our armed forces will adapt to the change in the professional manner for which they are rightly held in the very highest regard.

There will be those who would have preferred to continue to exclude homosexuals, but the law is the law. We cannot choose the decisions we implement. The status quo is simply not an option. The code centres on the paramount need to maintain the operational effectiveness of the armed forces. I have no doubt that it is the best way forward.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): First, I begin by thanking the Secretary of State for his courtesy in giving me an early sight of his statement. I appreciate that courtesy and, given the nature of the subject, I am sure that the House will too.

The Secretary of State referred to the ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, and set out why the Government have decided to change existing policy. At the outset, may I say that I regret the nature of the ruling.

[Mr. Iain Duncan Smith]

I have always believed—as did both the previous and present Governments—that we should follow the advice of the armed forces. That advice has always been that lifting the ban would adversely affect operational effectiveness.

The right hon. Gentleman was right to state that, because the armed forces have a special function and exist solely to protect our rights, a careful balance has always had to be struck. I regret that the court chose to dismiss the advice of the armed forces. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the matter has never been to do with prejudice, but with the operational effectiveness of our armed forces?

However, the fact is that the Government have decided to act on the ruling and to implement the change in policy by means of the code of conduct. As the Secretary of State said, they do so without having to introduce legislation or hold a debate. Today, we must focus simply on the code's practical implementation, in the hope that we can iron out what we perceive to be some of the major problems that may lie ahead.

The code is all about sexual behaviour, as the Secretary of State made clear. I agree with him that, in this context, the only way to write a code such as this is to make it as broad as possible and not to be specific. However, despite the guidance and advice in the statement, the matter boils down to a two-line service test, which in essence comprises only one sentence. How that test is operated will be critical. Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore place the guidance and the advice to commanding officers in the Library of the House, so that hon. Members can see how he intends the code to operate in practice?

In addition, I believe that four questions must be answered if we are to understand how the code is to work, and whether it will change how the armed forces operate. The first question concerns the rights of all service men and women.

The issue was neatly summed up by the former Minister for the Armed Forces, now the Secretary of State for Scotland. In our last debate on this matter in 1996, he raised the case of a service woman who had asked him whether her rights would be protected if the ban were lifted. She explained that she would not now be expected to share intimate surroundings with a man, irrespective of whether he had sexual intentions towards her. She went on to ask how Parliament would protect her rights if she had to share accommodation with another woman whom she believed to be sexually attracted her. She said that the matter was not one of prejudice but about her rights to privacy—much as the Government have set out today.

I accept that the question is incredibly difficult to answer, as the Secretary of State said. However, now we have a code covering all sexual behaviour, both heterosexual and homosexual. What guidance has the Secretary of State given to commanding officers for dealing with such a situation? Furthermore, in dealing with such a matter, different services and units may implement the test set out by the right hon. Gentleman but arrive at very different solutions. That could lead to concerns in other units about injustice if they are not treated in exactly the same way as others.

Secondly, what provision has the Secretary of State made in the guidance to commanding officers about those placed in authority over junior leaders, cadets and other young men and women who enter the armed forces at an early age? The right hon. Gentleman tabled an amendment concerning such matters during proceedings on the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Does he agree that the nature of forces discipline and the way in which the forces operate, which gives huge power to those in authority, places an even greater duty of care than exists outside the forces? How will he deal with that, and what advice has he given?

Thirdly, how do the Government propose to deal with the disparity in approach between the three services as well as between units of each of the services? Recent cases such as the Army Air Corps colonel and a female lieutenant-commander in the Women's Royal Naval Service led to very different outcomes. Even though the colonel was acquitted at his court-martial, he was fired from the Army, while the lieutenant-commander has subsequently been promoted. Such disparities in treatment will have to be dealt with, particularly now that this has widened to such a degree.

As for those serving in the same unit, although problems and conflicts arising from relationships between different sexes have been contained—partly because there are fewer occasions when men and women are in command over each other—there is, as a result of the judgment, a possibility that same-sex relationships that develop quite legitimately outside the barracks or the ship may lead to conflicts and difficulties within those units, especially if the individuals are of different ranks. What guidelines has the Secretary of State given to commanding officers? What advice has he given them about how to deal with such relationships? Should they be declared immediately, and will the individuals be allowed to serve in the same unit or barrack room if challenged, for example, about the possibility of favouritism from others who may perceive there to be an issue?

Because of this huge change that will affect the behaviour of armed forces personnel, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there should be a fundamental review of the effects of the policy at the earliest possibly opportunity? I believe that there should be. As and when the Conservative party returns to power, we will pledge to conduct such a review and act on the advice of the armed forces. I hope that the Secretary of State will do the same.

Surely one of the greatest concerns arising from the judgment is the way in which the convention is being applied to the military. There is a danger that issues such as the role of women in the front line and even our training policy could be decided by the European Court of Human Rights and not by our own Government and armed forces. Has the Secretary of State discussed the matter with other signatories to the convention, many of whom have opt-outs regarding its operation? If he has not, will he undertake to do so as a matter of urgency?

In conclusion, all of us can only hope that there will be no ill effects as a result of this change of policy and that the Government's policy will succeed in resolving the matters that may arise. I hope that the Government will pledge to the House today to undertake whatever action is necessary to rectify any problems that may arise immediately.

Mr. Hoon: I begin by welcoming the significant shift that has been obvious from the comments of the

Opposition Front Bench in recent days. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) originally appeared to condemn out of hand the judges of the European Court of Human Rights and questioned their right to decide this sort of question, so I am delighted that he has now accepted the decision. He has set out a series of practical and sensible observations about the way in which it should operate. In particular, he emphasised the paramount importance of maintaining the operational effectiveness of our armed forces. I emphasised that point in my earlier comments, and it is also emphasised in the code of conduct.

The hon. Gentleman said, rightly, that the code is set out in broad terms. It is inevitable, when dealing with delicate questions of personal relationships, whether they be heterosexual or homosexual, that commanding officers in particular will have to operate extremely sensitively in dealing with these matters. Again, that is set out in the code of conduct, but it is not practicable to list every type of conduct that might constitute social misbehaviour. Commanding officers already have to deal with issues according to the circumstances in which they arise, as is inevitable when dealing with delicate matters.

I am willing to place the guidance issued to commanding officers in the Library of the House of Commons, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will take the opportunity to see the detailed way in which commanding officers are to be guided. Ultimately, however, commanding officers must have regard to the circumstances with which they must deal, and they will apply the code of conduct in a sensitive and sensible way according to the cases that confront them.

I was a little disappointed to hear the hon. Gentleman suggest that we would need to review policy. It is difficult to see where a review might lead. I have made it clear, and he appeared to accept it, that it was necessary to implement the decision of the European Court of Human Rights. If he accepts the importance of implementing the decision, it is difficult to see how it can be reviewed, other than by saying—as, I regret, the hon. Gentleman originally appeared to—that we should seek not to implement it. We are bound to implement the decision, and we have done so in a way that is wholly consistent with operational effectiveness.

The hon. Gentleman knows that the United Kingdom ratified the European convention on human rights as long ago as 1951. It has been accepted by all UK Governments ever since, and decisions have been complied with by successive Governments. As far as discussions with other signatory states are concerned, the hon. Gentleman may find it interesting to know that only one NATO nation appears to have a formal ban on homosexuals being members of the armed forces. Clearly, this has not been a problem for NATO nations.

The hon. Gentleman properly emphasised the point that problems between the sexes are every bit as sensitive, delicate and difficult as problems that might occur involving members of the same sex. The code of conduct deals firmly with such matters on a non-discriminatory basis, which is the only way to proceed. I am pleased to welcome the hon. Gentleman's measured comments. We need to emphasise the need to preserve operational effectiveness in our armed forces to ensure that British forces maintain the excellent standards admired around the world.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): I was one of the Members who, when this matter was debated in 1996, supported the amendment tabled by Edwina Currie, to whom I pay tribute.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the common-sense decision that he has taken this afternoon. Since it stems directly from a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, I may point out that, had the Conservative party remained in power, it would have had to make a decision on the matter. As Conservative Governments accepted the authority of the European Court of Human Rights throughout their periods in office, it is difficult to see what other decision they could have come to.

Over the years—indeed, centuries—homosexuals have served at every level in our armed forces with loyalty and distinction. Is it not better, therefore, to accept that fact than pretend that it does not exist? It will not do for people to say that they oppose discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in principle while they act differently in practice.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his observations. He is right to say that as this was a significant decision by the European Court of Human Rights, it was necessary for the Government to implement it. I am equally grateful to the service chiefs for the constructive way in which they have approached a change in policy. It is not enough just to analyse legally the decision of the court; it is necessary to find a policy by which to implement it in the United Kingdom.

I am grateful to the service chiefs for their constructive and positive approach to this matter. They have drawn up the code of conduct, which will allow us both to preserve operational effectiveness and to ensure that the rights of individuals are properly protected, as my right hon. Friend suggested.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I too thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy in giving me an advance copy of his statement. The Liberal Democrats welcome his announcement. The European Court of Human Rights has shown that homosexual service in the armed forces of the United Kingdom is an issue of civil liberties. In that respect, the sexual orientation of an individual should be no bar to service, either in recruitment or promotion.

I have served with hon. Members on both sides of the House in the parliamentary armed forces scheme and have heard about some of the concerns of members of the armed forces. In my constituency, I have also heard about those concerns, but our armed forces must reflect the make-up of the modern society from which they are drawn. The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith) said that there are no occasions on which men or women have direct control over each other. That is clearly wrong. Every warship in the Royal Navy is run according to the chain of command, whether that is male or female.

The Secretary of State pointed out that the implementation of the new code of conduct will be a challenge for the leadership of our armed forces. He is

[Mr. Paul Keetch]

right. Does he agree that great sensitivity to the concerns of gay and straight personnel will need to be exercised, if a cultural sea-change is to be achieved without damaging the morale and efficiency of our armed forces?

The Secretary of State referred to the experience of other nations which have implemented such a code of conduct. Will he tell the House which other countries he has consulted? I met some Australians this week, who confirmed that their overall experience in this matter was positive.

I have a few questions for the Secretary of State. Does he agree that the delay in changing the policy, and the continuation of the Tory fight with the European Court means that the retrospective claims for compensation for dismissed personnel are likely to be substantial? Is he aware that £60 million has already been paid to 5,000 service women, who were obliged to leave the service on the ground of pregnancy?

Does he agree that, as MOD budgets are already tight, the Government's belated realisation that the UK armed forces should reflect their society is likely to cost the MOD money? How many compensation cases does he expect? What is his estimate of the cost?

Finally, will he confirm that, in the UK, if people are fit for the task—whether they are black or white, male or female, straight or gay—they should be welcome in our armed forces?

Mr. Hoon: I shall deal solely with the specific questions put by the hon. Gentleman towards the end of his observations. We delayed only as long as it took to review properly the implications of the court's decision, and to consider extremely carefully their effect on the armed forces. We obviously wanted to ensure that we agreed on a code of conduct that was accepted by the service chiefs and by the armed forces. We took the minimum amount of time to do that. I agree that any continuing uncertainty would have cost money, but, perhaps more crucially, it would have left the armed forces unsure as to which policy they were required to implement. I do not accept that there was undue delay; there was a proper delay—consistent with the need to find the right answer.

I am unable to give the hon. Gentleman precise figures as to the cost of any claims for compensation, because we are still negotiating with those people who are affected. However, when that process has been completed, I am willing to write to him to give him an indication of the costs.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I very much welcome the fact that the Government have accepted with good grace the ruling of the European Court. I look forward to reading, in the next defence White Paper, that sexual orientation will be included with all the other high ideals that we set for our society. *[Interruption.]* I see the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) having a fit of apoplexy, but we are a decent society now and we must reflect the way in which we live today. Unquestionably, the armed forces are up to that job—they are able to respond—but naturally there will be some concerns, especially among people from the lower ranks.

The Secretary of State has told us that the higher ranks are strongly committed to the programme, but will he answer two questions? First, what extra training has been given to members of the higher ranks to enable them to ensure that the information gets through to others in a way that helps them to understand what this will mean for them in their working lives? Secondly, because of the unease from the ranks, is there any way in which people may be able to share some concerns—many of which are unreal? They would be much better put at ease by people who have been properly trained.

I very much welcome today's announcement.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her observations. I shall deal solely with her specific questions. On extra training, approximately 3,000 packs of detailed information and guidance for commanding officers have been sent out, and should have been opened in connection with the statement that I am making to the House today, so commanding officers will have detailed briefing, which they will pass down the chain of command.

I am confident that the concerns that my hon. Friend mentioned in her second question will be allayed by the clear leadership given by service chiefs. As I said earlier, I am extremely grateful to them for the leadership that they have shown in this difficult area.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that he sounded deeply unconvincing when making his statement? Does he further accept that the announcement will be greeted with dismay through all three services, which surely, by their faithful and gallant service over generations, have earned the right to be exempted from these lunatic politically correct nostrums? Will he assure the House of Commons that he will listen very carefully to the chiefs as they report back to him, as this militarily disabling rule comes into force?

Mr. Hoon: I always listen with the greatest care to the hon. Gentleman's observations on the armed forces because I recognise that, in the course of a lifetime's interest in the armed forces, he has accumulated a good deal of knowledge. I am slightly concerned that he might just be out of touch on this question, and that he may not have reflected properly on his observations, especially in light of what the service chiefs have been saying on the subject. The service chiefs have made it clear that they endorse and support the code of conduct. They were largely responsible for its drafting. As the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said, it is important that we find ways to ensure that the decision of the European Court is implemented in a way that is consistent with service effectiveness.

Therefore, I do not accept the observations that the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) has made. Sadly, they sound very much like the observations that were made by very many people—members of the Conservative party, perhaps not wholly familiar with the services—in relation to the admission of women to the armed forces. In the short time that I have been Secretary of State for Defence, I have learned how successful and effective women have been in the armed forces.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that his decision and his announcement today will be very welcome indeed? First, it will be

welcome in upholding the authority of the European Court of Justice and its interpretation of the European convention on human rights, which is the basis on which we, as a party, fought the last general election and which has been part of our party policy for a long time.

Secondly, is my right hon. Friend aware that, some years ago, from the Opposition Front Bench, I moved that homosexuality should not be regarded as grounds for debarment from service in the armed forces? I did so for two reasons. I did so, first, for the sake of the human rights of the individuals involved, whatever one may think of people's particular sexual preferences; and secondly, because it removed a major cause of blackmail, suspicion and unhappiness.

In the 1970s and 1980s, we had obvious examples, including the major scandalous trial in Cyprus, in which representatives of foreign powers—the cold war is irrelevant to this—were prepared to use what they perceived as weakness, shyness or disability to blackmail people to force them to release secrets. There are strong and powerful military reasons for accepting this proposal.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend tempts me to make a party political point about the incorporation of the European convention on human rights. I recall that Lord Hailsham and the late Keith Joseph conducted a campaign in the 1970s calling for its incorporation. It is unfortunate that some Conservative Members have forgotten their party's history. *[Interruption.]* It is suggested that they were not born, but I rather think that they were.

It is right and important that we find a mechanism for emphasising the rights of the individual while not in any way jeopardising the effectiveness of our service personnel. I am sure that this code of conduct, which was endorsed by the service chiefs, will achieve that.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): If the chiefs of staff really have not conveyed to Ministers the sheer depths of the anger in the armed forces at being forced to share their homes—the cramped barracks and ships in which they often live—with practising homosexuals, will the Secretary of State say whether, in his forthcoming and fairly frequent meetings with his French counterpart, he will discuss the fact that France has a derogation from all matters connected with military discipline in the European convention on human rights? Are there any circumstances whatever impinging on the morale and effectiveness of our armed forces under which the right hon. Gentleman would be willing to stand up to the European Court and apply for us to have such a derogation?

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman needs to study a little more carefully the way in which the European convention operates. He needs to understand that the French derogation was secured at the start of the process. Since 1951, no Government—neither Conservative nor Labour—have sought to negotiate the kind of derogation that he advocates. In reality, it is not possible to secure such a derogation after the event; it would not have any effect on decided cases. I made it clear in my opening remarks that it is not possible for Conservative Members to pick and choose the European Court decisions that they would implement. That is simply not possible.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): My right hon. Friend's statement will be welcome to the many people who have long argued and campaigned for lifting the ban on gays serving in the military. In 1998, I took part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme and had numerous discussions over many months on this with various ranks. We discussed in detail how military discipline could cope with such a change and, although it was clear that there was resistance to change in all ranks of the Army, it was acknowledged that, when it came to the bottom line, military discipline and regulation would ensure that the code could be operated properly.

Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating ex-service men and women in the Rank Outsiders organisation on the dignified way in which they have campaigned so successfully on this issue? Will he also ensure that the new codes are monitored effectively, so that the House can have another opportunity to ensure that they have operated properly and have not prejudiced any member of the armed forces?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his measured and thoughtful observations. On his final point, I made it clear that the services' policy of not tolerating discrimination and harassment will apply to those who are affected by my statement.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I think that I am the Member of this House who has the most recent service in the regular armed forces. I do not presume to speak for members of the armed forces because that would be wrong, but I have some understanding of how they feel. The Secretary of State should understand that the vast majority are not homophobic—a dreadful word—and know that there have always been homosexuals in the armed forces, many of whom have served with great distinction.

Does the Secretary of State understand, however, that when members of the armed forces hear of this decision they will, for very good reasons, feel betrayed? They will think that political correctness has triumphed over operational effectiveness and the defence of the realm. Furthermore, they will believe that the Government are undermining our distinguished armed forces so that they will no longer have the respect that they have had up to now. I have a supplementary question on a point that may further undermine the armed forces. Will gay partners be allowed to share married quarters?

Mr. Hoon: I hope that when the hon. Gentleman reads his contribution, as he may in *Hansard* tomorrow, he will ask himself whether his first two sentences about the role and attitudes of the armed forces and the position of homosexuals in the past were wholly consistent with his next observation. There was a clear inconsistency in what he said.

I invite the hon. Gentleman to read my statement carefully because it is not in any way motivated by political correctness. It is motivated by a clear decision of the European Court of Human Rights, with which the Conservative party, in the unlikely event of its ever returning to power, would have to deal. That is the position that we have taken. We have dealt with the matter in co-operation with the service chiefs. He is right not to try and substitute his view of the services for those of the chiefs. They have accepted the need to implement the court's decision.

[Mr. Hoon]

I make it clear that homosexual couples will not have rights or access to service quarters because they will not be married and will not therefore be treated any differently from other unmarried couples.

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): I too congratulate my right hon. Friend on introducing a sensible solution, which we all accept, to this tricky problem. I welcome the practical response from the Opposition Front Benchers.

In a modern society, it is important that we have armed forces that reflect that society. Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to make the point that almost every other NATO nation operates a similar policy? Will he also pass on to the service chiefs the congratulations of Labour Members on the practical, common-sense way in which they have introduced a proposal that will solve the problem without in any way challenging the efficiency of our armed forces?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his remarks. On his observation about the practical response from Opposition Front Benchers, I cannot help but reflect that they may have to do a little more work on educating those who sit behind them, but they have made progress in recent days and no doubt that progress can continue.

Every time that an hon. Member has commented on the need for the armed forces to reflect society, it has caused certain Conservative Members apoplexy, not least the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex. Regardless of any ideological debate about whether we should try to ensure that the armed forces reflect society, the forces recruit about 25,000—mostly young—people every year, so they inevitably reflect the society in which we live. There are different policies in different countries in NATO, but, as I said earlier, only one NATO country has a formal ban on homosexuals serving in the armed forces.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Will the Secretary of State ensure that, for the isolated people who may need advice, Rank Outsiders will be able to advertise its helpline number in armed forces journals, which it has so far been barred from doing?

The Secretary of State said that the change was being made because the law is the law. Could not he say that it is because human rights are human rights? He said that maintaining the ban was no longer legally sustainable. Does he agree that it is also not ethically or morally sustainable? Does he feel any remorse about, or can he offer any apology for, the careers that have been wrecked under his Government, as well as under previous ones? How many careers have been wrecked under the Labour Government? How much does he think that that will cost? Does he not think that the £10,000 rumoured as the compensation to be offered for the wrecking of careers and the most intrusive, rude and oppressive harassment is pathetic and inadequate?

Mr. Hoon: I should make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that this matter has been given very careful consideration; I am sorry that he has not given it quite the care and consideration that I might have hoped for. In the briefing pack for commanding officers, there will be a number of details of further advice and information that can be given to service personnel who need it.

I made it clear that negotiations on compensation were still under way, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment on amounts that have been agreed.

I should make it equally clear that, subject to obvious considerations of fitness, we shall look very sympathetically at applications from service personnel who wish to rejoin the services following discharge for homosexuality.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): While I am a strong supporter of the Secretary of State in this matter, precisely what were the "some concerns" to which he referred in his statement and from whom did they come?

Does the Secretary of State think that the shade of the grandfather of the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) would approve of his grandson's comments? What would he think, for example, about the situation of the Chindits? Speaking as a relation of Orde Wingate and as one who knows something about the matter, it is an outrageous slur on the Chindits, the Eighth Army and other units to suggest, as the hon. Gentleman did, that the decision is totally unacceptable. Since there are very many Mid-Sussexes floating around, would it not be a good idea to bring to public notice the distinguished service rendered by homosexual personnel and the units in which they operated—frankly, under force majeure—during the war?

I do not know whether my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) wants my support, but for once I strongly support his comments.

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend intrigued the House by conjuring the vision of the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex floating around. I have learned to my cost about debating history with my hon. Friend, so I shall not pursue him on that. However, I shall deal with the concerns that he mentioned.

I made it clear that we recruit about 25,000—mostly young—people to the armed forces each year. They reflect our society, which has a mixed view of homosexuality. It would be absurd for me to pretend otherwise. Those concerns are reflected in wider society, as they will be within the armed forces and will have to be addressed by commanding officers as they implement the code of conduct and this policy. If I pretended otherwise, Madam Speaker—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is clear that I must pay more attention to who is occupying the Chair. Having carefully avoided all sorts of mistakes in the course of my observations, I apologise for not recognising you.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): A bet that I believe that I would win is that no member of the European Court of Human Rights has ever served in a crowded mess in a ship or in a cramped army bivouac. If any of them had done so, they would not have come to such a ludicrous decision, which will damage military effectiveness.

Does the Secretary of State understand that there is a great difference between those who hid their homosexuality and permitting homosexuality to be overt, which the decision will allow? Does he understand that

no matter what guidance he gives, overt homosexuals will be ostracised and threatened in ships and in barracks, for example? That will do profound damage to the armed forces.

Mr. Hoon: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman chooses to substitute his own prejudices for, first of all—*[Interruption.]* If Conservative Members will allow me to finish, I shall explain why I think that the hon. Gentleman is dealing in prejudice. First, he is substituting his own view of the law for that of the European Court of Human Rights. It is not acceptable for hon. Members to say that decisions of the courts should be decided in a different way because the courts cannot possibly interpret the law properly.

We are dealing with the European Court of Human Rights, which has carefully considered the law and reached a conclusion. Right hon. and hon. Members know full well that it is necessary in a democratic society that upholds the rule of law to apply such decisions. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman is substituting his view of military effectiveness for that of the service chiefs, who have accepted the code of conduct. They have recognised that they must implement the decision of the European Court of Human Rights, and they are seeking to do so in a way that does not jeopardise military effectiveness in any way.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Does the Secretary of State not understand that his appalling decision will be greeted with dismay, particularly by ordinary soldiers in Her Majesty's Forces, many of whom joined the services precisely because they wished to turn their back on some of the values of modern society?

How can the right hon. Gentleman claim that operational effectiveness will not be impaired when the Government argued before the European Court of Human Rights that

"the presence of open or suspected homosexuals in the Armed Forces would have a substantial and negative effect on morale and consequently on the fighting power and operational effectiveness of the Armed Forces"?

How can he go back on what was the Government's line? Does he not understand the resentment that is felt by some of us in this country that the power to decide the composition of Her Majesty's armed forces has been usurped by a bunch of foreign judges in some continental city, when it should be decided by the people of this country and by this Parliament? Does he realise that he has created an enormous minefield, in which housing will be only one factor?

Mr. Hoon: I regret to say that the hon. Gentleman is probably the authentic voice of the Conservative party today. I worry about its future if such prejudices are to be on display. I treat his observations as an attack not on the Government but on the Opposition Front-Bench team. Before he makes such intemperate comments, he should ask himself a basic question. In the unlikely event that he is part of a Government at some stage in the future, what decision would he take in the light of a European Court decision? If he cannot answer that question, he should not have said what he has just said in the most intemperate terms. He should think more carefully about the observations that he makes in the House, otherwise he will condemn himself and his party to a lifetime of opposition. I am sure that my right hon. and hon. Friends will agree with that.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I understand the Secretary of State's predicament, and I realise how difficult this problem is, but there are people who have served in the armed forces who have grave and serious reservations about this decision. Will he address one of the questions that he was asked earlier? I have not read the code of conduct—it has only just been published—but what will be the repercussions on individuals' rights to privacy?

Mr. Hoon: I have dealt with those reservations, so I shall not repeat myself. As for the individual, the essence of the decision of the European Court of Human Rights is to protect the privacy of individuals. I made it clear that, in devising the code of conduct, we had regard to the importance not only of military effectiveness and discipline, but the rights of the individual. Those two matters are complementary, and are set out in the code of conduct. That is why the service chiefs are willing to endorse this approach, and to lead the chain of command so as to ensure that the reservations to which the hon. Gentleman referred, and which I accept, do not dominate the debate about the implementation of this policy.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Will the Secretary of State answer the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), which was based on the example given by the former Minister for the Armed Forces, now the Secretary of State for Scotland, of the woman who felt that her privacy might be invaded in certain circumstances? Why have the Government concentrated their service test on conduct of the individual rather than operational situations? Should not they be giving advice and guidance on whether heterosexuals should be expected to share accommodation with homosexuals, and whether homosexuals should be deployed in the front line in intimate living conditions? Despite this rushed attempt to deal with this most delicate situation, does he agree that this is a much more difficult and complex subject than perhaps he had anticipated, and that this statement is only the beginning of his troubles, not the end of them?

Mr. Hoon: In referring at the outset to the views of hon. Members on the Opposition Front Bench, I had in mind the hon. Gentleman's rather intemperate observations when the original decision was promulgated. He now seems to be rowing back from that and asking practical questions about the implementation of the policy.

I have been accused of delaying the implementation of the policy change, and now I am accused of rushing it. Somewhere in between, the Government may have got it just about right. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has not had time to study the document properly, but I have made it clear—and I repeat it—that at the heart of the code of conduct is an emphasis on operational effectiveness, and it clearly must also have regard to the privacy of individuals.

Operational effectiveness depends on a number of individuals working effectively together. Given the emphasis in the court's decision on the importance of

[Mr. Hoon]

privacy and the rights of the individual, it is right and appropriate to reconcile the importance of operational effectiveness with respect for the privacy of the individual. That is set out in the code of conduct, and it will be carried through in the operational guidance given to commanding officers. It will allow appropriate and proper decisions on the issue of accommodation that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Point of Order

5.4 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I gave notice to the Speaker of a point of order that I was asked to raise. I was fortunate to have the 1 pm to 1.30 pm slot in Westminster Hall for a debate on the situation in Serbia and Kosovo. When I went into that Chamber at 12.50 pm, it was stuffy, smelly and airless. It is no exaggeration to say—and others agreed with me—that it smelt like a rather full school pupils' changing room. There may be a ventilation problem, but my point is that it is no place for the House of Commons to conduct its official business.

I ask members of the Speaker's Office and the Office of the Serjeant at Arms to go and not just see but smell for themselves. I am not casting aspersions on the school parties that were present; my point concerns the nature of what we have set up in that place. It is totally unsuitable for prolonged parliamentary activity, at least while it remains as airless as it is now. Could the House authorities examine the matter?

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I, too, was in Westminster Hall today. I must admit that I did not smell anything, but perhaps I had left when the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) arrived.

The hon. Gentleman asked you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to make representations to Madam Speaker. Two debates took place in Westminster Hall this morning. One concerned post offices, and a good many people were interested and wanted to sit in the Public Gallery; the other dealt with petrol retailing, and a large number of petrol retailers had come to listen. In fact, the public area was not sufficient for the number of people who turned up. Only a few could go in at a time, for half an hour at a time, so no one had a chance to hear the whole debate. Perhaps that too could be mentioned in your representations.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I suggest that concerns about ventilation and housekeeping should be directed to the Serjeant at Arms. Hon. Members with concerns about management and arrangements generally in the new Chamber should contact the Chairman of the Modernisation Committee.

Medicinal Product Testing in Children

5.7 pm

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the clinical testing and licensing of new medicinal products that are to be used for the treatment of children.

The purpose of the Bill is to strengthen the licensing system relating to medicines that are likely to be prescribed for children, in response to growing concern about the widespread use in that context of off-label and unlicensed treatments. It may surprise hon. Members to learn that drugs routinely given to children are either not licensed for that purpose, or off-label: that is, they are prescribed in a way that is not in accordance with the instructions on the label regarding age, indication, dose or route of administration. It is no fault of the clinicians; rather, it is a direct result of deficiencies in the licensing system as it stands.

United Kingdom research published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1998 found that 25 per cent. of drugs were either off-label or not licensed for that purpose, although one in three children in hospital received drugs in that way. For babies admitted as patients, the figures are even higher: 65 per cent. of off-label or unlicensed treatments were given to nine out of every 10 infant patients, many of whom had been born prematurely.

The Government have acknowledged that the issue needs to be addressed. Indeed, the last Government played a leading role in the drafting of existing European guidance, which came into force in September 1997. The opening lines state:

"Children should not be given medicines which have not been adequately evaluated for use in that age group. There is a responsibility, shared by applicants and the competent authorities, to ensure that children have timely access to safe and effective medicines which have accurate, scientifically justified prescribing information."

Guidance, however, cannot ensure that medicines will be adequately evaluated, or that prescribing information will be made available to clinicians. Indeed, no one monitors whether the guidance is being followed.

A Europe-wide study published in this week's *British Medical Journal* shows the scale of the problem. Sixty-seven per cent. of children who were admitted to hospital in five different European countries over four weeks received unlicensed or off-label treatments. Nearly half the prescriptions were either unlicensed or off-label. Surprisingly, in the main those were routine treatments, prescribed extensively to children.

My Bill would begin to deal with that problem by establishing a proper licensing system for new medicines that are to be used for children. Britain should take a lead by placing a statutory duty on the pharmaceutical industry to supply paediatric data on new products when their use on children is likely.

I must acknowledge the cost implications of the extended testing that would have to be carried out to improve the information available to doctors when prescribing specifically for children. To ensure compliance with the spirit as well as the letter of my Bill, some incentive should be considered that would recognise the additional costs that will inevitably be borne, thereby guaranteeing accurate and timely paediatric data.

Since April last year, a reformed system has been operating in the United States. Although it is still relatively early days, indications are that the United States pharmaceutical industry is rising to the challenges and providing adequately evaluated medicine for children in particular age groups.

I stress that the Bill would not deprive children of beneficial off-label and unlicensed treatments. It would simply regulate and evaluate new products coming on to the market to improve the paediatric information that is available to doctors when they prescribe drugs to children. As product licences are reviewed every five years, potentially the new system could be extended to drugs that are already on the market.

Worryingly, as drugs are prescribed in an unlicensed or off-label fashion, no formal mechanism has been established for notifying, collating or processing adverse drug reactions. Indeed, doctors are unlikely to report adverse reactions because they feel vulnerable, having prescribed a drug that is off-label or unlicensed. We do not know the extent or impact of adverse reactions.

Many people will be alarmed at the thought of testing medicines on children, but that, in effect, is what is happening every day in the health service. Under the present system, all children are potential guinea pigs when they enter hospital or see their general practitioner, yet neither children nor parents are aware of it. It is a hit-and-miss and, sometimes, hazardous system. Seriously ill children may be receiving inadequate doses of life-saving drugs, while others may be receiving worryingly high and potentially harmful doses of inappropriate treatments.

It is recognised that children's bodies absorb and process drugs differently from adults. Dosages cannot be based simply on a child's size, weight, body surface area or age. That is why specific, rigorous studies are important. With a closely monitored clinical study, properly designed and structured, as recommended by the existing European guidance, any adverse reactions and failure to respond to treatment would be speedily picked up and dealt with.

I stress that only children who would directly benefit from the drug—those already ill or being treated—would be involved in the testing. In addition, with modern non-invasive techniques, it would be possible to carry out trials with minimum discomfort to children. Of course, every study would have to have the full consent of parents and, where appropriate, of the child, too.

Proper medical trials would make the system far safer than at present, where drugs are prescribed with inadequate information. Currently, doctors are left to sink or to swim with their limited clinical knowledge and judgment. That is particularly the case for GPs or junior doctors who are not specialists in paediatric medicine, but are expected to take responsibility for prescribing to children. They should have the benefit of rigorous testing, carried out by acknowledged experts, to ensure that their prescribing is soundly based. Under the Bill, existing European guidance on the conduct of drug trials would be rigorously and ethically applied.

The Bill calls for children to be treated in exactly the same way as adults. In one important respect, children are no different from adults: they are individuals entitled to the best medical treatment available. Under the current system, they are effectively disfranchised. Ironically,

[Mr. Andrew Love]

the Medicines Act 1968, which introduced the current licensing system, was a direct result of the thalidomide tragedy—a drug that directly affected children. My Bill would be an important step towards dealing with the deficiencies in the current Act that are already widely acknowledged by everyone involved in prescribing medicines to children.

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to introduce the Bill today, as it coincides with the re-opening of the Bristol Royal infirmary inquiry. The inquiry will be focusing on making recommendations that could help secure high-quality care across the national health service, and licensing medicines specifically for children is particularly pertinent to achieving that goal.

My Bill has the support of the Consumers Association, the Royal College of Nursing and academic medical opinion. I am pleased to say that it also has cross-party support, which demonstrates that hon. Members on both sides of the House recognise the need for change. Such change would significantly improve the licensing system for children's medicines and potentially benefit a very large number of children in the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Andrew Love, Ms Julia Drown, Mr. John Austin, Audrey Wise, Mrs. Eileen Gordon, Dr. Vincent Cable and Mr. David Amess.

MEDICINAL PRODUCT TESTING IN CHILDREN

Mr. Andrew Love accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for the clinical testing and licensing of new medicinal products that are to be used for the treatment of children: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March, and to be printed [Bill 45].

Orders of the Day

Representation of the People Bill

2ND ALLOTTED DAY

Considered in Committee [Progress, 15 December].

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

5.17 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): On a point of order, Mr. Lord. There has been some suggestion that the Bill's Report stage may be scheduled for debate in the House as early as next Monday. Although Opposition Members should have no objection if that is so, the Committee would be helped if—at some point, not necessarily now—guidance could be provided on the tabling of further amendments that right. hon. and hon. Members may wish to make to the Bill and on the starring of those amendments.

As the Committee is expected to finish considering the Bill by 7 o'clock tomorrow, and the House will not be sitting on Friday, I am sure that you will appreciate the point, Mr. Lord. The Opposition do not object to scheduling Report stage for Monday, but some guidance on tabling amendments would be very helpful.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Further to that point of order, Mr. Lord. I should like to make a slightly more hardline point than that made by the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). We believe that it would be preferable to follow the usual rule—allowing a weekend, or several days, between the end of a Committee's consideration of a Bill and the beginning of Report—not least because there will be colleagues who, for whatever reason, may have assumed that Report would be held at a later date and require time at least to read *Hansard* and decide what amendments to table.

The normal courtesies—if they are to be followed by Madam Speaker and you, Mr. Lord—preclude moving to a subsequent stage in less than 48 hours. If possible, we should have an indication. Will you, Mr. Lord, confirm at an appropriate time that the normal rule would be that, between the end of the Committee and the beginning of Report, there would be time for hon. Members to read *Hansard* and to table amendments, with a day in between the tabling and the debate to ensure that everybody had due notice of further stages of the Bill?

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael Lord): I was not aware of the hon. Gentleman's concerns, but I imagine that they will be dealt with in the usual way during the business statement tomorrow; or, if not, through the usual channels.

Clause 1

NEW SYSTEM OF ELECTORAL REGISTRATION.

Amendment moved [15 December]: No. 1, in page 2, line 44, leave out from "elector" to end of line 2 on page 3.—[*Mr. Kaufman.*]

The Second Deputy Chairman: I remind the Committee that with this we are discussing the following: Amendment No. 2, in clause 8, page 10, line 11, leave out ", 2".

Amendment No. 3, in page 10, line 14, leave out from beginning to "and" in line 15.

Amendment No. 4, in schedule 1, page 19, line 28, leave out from "declarations" to end of line 29.

Amendment No. 5, in page 26, leave out lines 28 to 31.

Amendment No. 47, in schedule 2, page 27, line 33, leave out "20" and insert "5".

Amendment No. 48, in page 27, line 33, leave out "20" and insert "10".

Amendment No. 49, in page 27, line 42, leave out "20" and insert "5".

Amendment No. 50, in page 27, line 42, leave out '20' and insert "10".

Amendment No. 82, in page 28, line 2, at end insert—

"(4A) The third set of conditions is that—

(a) he was included in a register of parliamentary electors in respect of an address at a place that is situated within the constituency concerned,

(b) that entry in the register was made on the basis that he was resident, or to be treated for the purposes of registration as resident, at that address, and

(c) he either, prior to ceasing to be a resident of the United Kingdom, signed a declaration stating an intention to return to the United Kingdom to live within ten years of departure, or, alternatively, he continues to pay income tax annually in the United Kingdom.".

Amendment No. 51, in page 30, line 23, leave out "20" and insert "5".

Amendment No. 52, in page 30, line 23, leave out "20" and insert "10".

Amendment No. 53, in page 30, line 32, leave out "20" and insert "5".

Amendment No. 54, in page 30, line 32, leave out "20" and insert "10".

Schedule 2 stand part.

Amendment No. 7, in schedule 4, page 34, leave out lines 52 and 53.

Amendment No. 8, in page 35, line 19, leave out from "connection" to end of line 20.

New clause 1—*British citizens overseas*—

".—(1) Sections 1 to 4 and subsections (1) and (2) of section 12 of the Representation of the People Act 1985, as amended by the Representation of the People Act 1989, are hereby repealed.

(2) In section 3C of the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1978 (as inserted by the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999), in subsection (2), paragraph (b) and the word 'or' at the end of paragraph (a) shall be omitted."

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): When my speech was interrupted on 15 December, I was about to take an intervention from the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). There has been a more prolonged intervention in my speech—namely the entire Second Reading of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which the House had on Monday. In that debate, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made an announcement about the content of clause 130 of the Bill, which deals with the subject of this amendment and the others being taken with it. I found both clause 130 and what my right hon. Friend had to say profoundly unsatisfactory. I very much hope that what he said is not the last word. I will come to that in a moment.

I would like to resume the argument that I was putting to the House when the debate was adjourned just under four weeks ago. When we talk about the overseas vote, Opposition Members seem to indicate that my amendment would remove some major right. In fact, this fancy franchise is a flop. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) has fantasised in this House about possibly 3 million overseas voters being removed if my amendment were accepted.

When the Conservative Government introduced the overseas vote, they did so unilaterally and not as a matter of consensus, as the present Government are seeking with this Bill. They introduced the measure against my opposition, as shadow Home Secretary, and that of the party which I represented.

Mr. Greenway: The intervening period has allowed us the opportunity for further research. When I seek to catch your eye later, Mr. Lord, I will give the right hon. Gentleman the benefit of the consistency that he has shown. However, he cannot say that there was no consensus on that matter. In its report in the 1982–83 Session, the Select Committee on Home Affairs unanimously supported a recommendation that all UK citizens registered in EEC countries should be permitted to vote in British parliamentary elections. The thoroughness of the report indicated that there was cross-party consensus for there to be overseas electors, and the subsequent legislation sought to implement that report.

Mr. Kaufman: That is not what emerged from the 1984 debates. The Home Affairs Committee in that Parliament took the view that there should not be an overseas vote, and did so unanimously. It is as simple as that.

Whether or not that is so, let us look at what the Conservative Government of the day envisaged might happen—and what might happen, let us be clear, on the basis of the seven-year period with which they started. They forecast that there would be 800 overseas votes per constituency in the seven years, representing half a million overseas voters. The latest figure—for last year—was 13,677: 21 per constituency. That is the extent of this huge, allegedly unalienable right, introduced in any case only 16 years ago, that the Conservative party persists in demanding.

The greatest number registered—I mean people registered to vote, not actual votes registered—throughout that period was 34,454 in 1991, which is 53 per constituency or 0.08 per cent. of the electorate. In 1990, the figure fell to 1,836—on the kindest possible calculation, that is 0.00 per cent. of the electorate—and that was after legislation extending the period to 20 years.

The amendment is not designed to stifle an insatiable demand for democracy among expatriates.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The right hon. Gentleman has explained that few people want to take advantage of the right that they have, but does not the fact that those few people do take advantage of it suggest that they feel strongly that they want to participate in the national life of their mother country, and is not that a good argument for continuing with that right?

Mr. Kaufman: A more direct way of their participating in our national life would be for them to live here rather than trying to affect directly how the country is governed after 20 years abroad.

[Mr. Kaufman]

The hon. Gentleman has intervened at a felicitous moment, because I was coming to the effect that even that tiny number of people can have. I see in the Chamber my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith), whose return to the House we welcomed in 1997. He was defeated in the 1992 general election by 19 votes, after three counts; 65 overseas votes were registered; 38 were cast by proxy—the majority from South Africa—and the proxies were well-known local Conservative party activists. He was out of the House for five years, not because the people of Vale of Glamorgan did not want him as their Member of Parliament but because a small group of Conservatives in the constituency defeated him on behalf of people who would never have been represented by him one way or the other.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I believe that I am the only Member of Parliament ever to have lost a seat in a general election when the majority of votes cast by constituents resident in the constituency supported that candidate. He may not be aware of the sense of outrage in the constituency after the 1992 result, which I believe was reflected in the 1997 election, at which I gained the largest majority ever seen in the seat.

Mr. Kaufman: That experience illustrates the illegitimacy of the fancy franchise introduced unilaterally by the Conservative party and multiplied by four in the periodicity deliberately to suit itself: not to enfranchise the electorate but to enhance its own electoral prospects, as can be seen by the incidence of application to be registered.

5.30 pm

It is not simply that the services of my hon. Friend were denied to the House for five years, but that—given a tiny quirk of the vote in other constituencies—the overseas vote could have affected the government of the country. In the 1992 election, the overall Conservative majority was only 21. Eleven seats the other way and the Conservative party would not have had a majority. It would have lost the election and probably been replaced by the Labour party, even though it did not have an overall majority.

The overseas vote can decide not only who wins or loses in an individual constituency, but who governs a country in which large numbers of people who apply for the vote have chosen not to live for a generation and in which their children may never have lived at all. Tax exiles can decide the Government who decide what the taxes are. The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), who was an Under-Secretary at the Home Office when the second piece of legislation went through, admitted the position. He said that it might be true that the legislation would extend the franchise to a number of people who might be described as tax dodgers and thus were perhaps unworthy. Of course, the Conservative party may draw its most devoted support from that sort of person.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Before we leave the subject of the Vale of Glamorgan example, can the right hon. Gentleman tell us whether the overseas voters in that constituency in the 1992 general election had never had a connection with the constituency? Is that also part of his case, or had they had a connection but left to live overseas? There is a huge difference between the allegation that votes were cast in Vale of Glamorgan on behalf of people who had no link with the area and the allegation that the right to vote was exercised, under the rules of the time, by people who lived abroad but had a secure link to the area.

Mr. Kaufman: I do not accept the distinction that the hon. Gentleman seeks to draw. He may regard my view as banal and elementary, but I believe that if one wants to decide the Government of a country, one should at least have the courtesy to live there. The hon. Gentleman earlier raised the case of his brother. Although I know that the Liberal Democrat party has a different policy for every street, having a different policy for every brother would be taking things too far.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am especially interested in this point because two relatives of mine live in Palma, although as far as I am aware they do not live there because I live here. They have both contributed substantially to this country over a long time and have paid, and continue to pay, taxes in this country. They are not worthy objects of the right hon. Gentleman's waspish denigration. Why should not they have an opportunity to contribute to the democratic process in this country when they have contributed substantially to its fortunes?

Mr. Kaufman: I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman's relatives wished to get away from him they would have moved further than the Balearic islands, and perhaps they should consider that in their future residential dispositions.

The vote in this country is based on residential qualification. People who live abroad and have some sentimental or fiscal connection with this country are not in the same position as those who live here and are subject to the decisions of Parliament and the Government.

My approach to the matter is extremely simplistic, which makes me impervious to interventions such as that from the hon. Gentleman. If I were to approach the matter on an "if and but" basis, I would be vulnerable, but the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) pointed out that my position on the matter has been consistent for 16 years. I intend to maintain that position until my colleagues on the Front Bench—so brilliant in so many other ways—learn the appropriate lesson on this issue.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman as, before he came into the Chamber, I was pointing out that he sought to intervene when I was speaking four weeks ago.

Mr. Fabricant: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who is right to say that I tried to intervene on him in the previous century. However, he cannot have it both ways. He said that, given the small numbers involved, he was not trying to make a party political point,

but then he gave the example of the 1992 election result in the Vale of Glamorgan constituency, which he clearly considers to be a party political matter.

How does the right hon. Gentleman know the outcome of that election? It was a secret ballot. How does he know that the overseas voters in the Vale of Glamorgan election all voted Conservative? After all, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), was born in South Africa and lived there for a long time. He used to be so left wing that it is doubtful that he would have been able to get into the new Labour party. However, he certainly is not, and has never been, a Conservative. Is the right hon. Gentleman making an uncharacteristically spiteful political point, or not?

The Temporary Chairman (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. Before the right hon. Gentleman replies, I urge hon. Members who intervene to do so briefly and succinctly, so as to ensure an orderly debate.

Mr. Kaufman: I am interested that the hon. Member for Lichfield assumes that, if a point is political, it must be spiteful. As far as I am concerned, I am making a party political point. I often make such points, and have spent a lifetime doing so. The case that I am arguing has natural justice on its side, but I am also putting it forward on behalf of the Labour party. I was elected by my constituents to act on behalf of the Labour party, and I shall continue to do so.

When my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary introduced the Bill on Monday, he said that he was going to reduce the period of the overseas vote from 20 years to 10 years. He then said that the Select Committee on Home Affairs had recommended a reduction to five years. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State knows the amity that I bear for the Government—if amity can be regarded as a synonym for grovelling sycophancy. However, as Chairman of a different Select Committee, I sometimes wonder what the point of Select Committees is if Governments are able to ignore their recommendations.

The previous Government ignored the recommendation of a Select Committee and introduced the overseas vote. This Government saw what a Select Committee of this House, in this Parliament, said on the matter, and decided to ignore it. I do not see the point of Select Committees doing all the work that they do if Governments then brush their conclusions aside.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Kaufman: I will certainly give way to my hon. Friend in a moment.

We should be clear that we are considering a franchise which the previous Conservative Government introduced, despite strong opposition from Labour. The period initially proposed was seven years; under pressure, the then Government proposed to reduce that period to five years. Now my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary believes that he is doing justice to the issue by reducing the period to double what the Conservative party originally regarded as acceptable. That simply is not satisfactory. Ten years is far too long—there could be three general elections during that period.

Is clause 130 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill set in stone, or will the Government consider amendments to it on their merits? If so, I shall seek to table an amendment to that Bill comparable to the one before us. Are the Government at least ready to consider the five-year period recommended by the Select Committee and originally introduced by the Conservative Government 15 years ago? I would like to be able to work with the Government on this issue, but one needs a certain amount of flexibility if their most loyal supporters are not to become—on one issue, at any rate—a little disenchanted with them.

I hope that the Minister will respond in a way that will allow me to withdraw the amendment and seek to table another one to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. Before I sit down, I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), as I said I would. One must be courteous to one's colleagues.

Mr. Linton: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I agree that there is no harm in being accused of making party political points. After all, we are elected to this place as members of political parties. However, I remind the House that the Home Affairs Committee report had unanimous support from members of all three parties in recommending a reduction from 20 years to five. That policy was overturned by the Opposition only when they realised that the implication of that would be to deprive them of the monthly cheque for £83,000 from Mr. Michael Ashcroft. That is a clear case of changing policy for cash.

Mr. Kaufman: The best way to deal with what one might call the Ashcroft issue would be to abolish the overseas vote. The problem would be solved just like that. However, I accept what my hon. Friend says.

Mr. Fabricant: As I said earlier, the right hon. Gentleman has taken an uncharacteristically partisan approach. He said in the last century that he has been consistent—

Mr. Kaufman: Will the hon. Gentleman please stop talking about the last century? We are in the 20th century until midnight on 31 December this year. Let us at least get that right.

Mr. Fabricant: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. In fact, the former Dean of Lichfield, the Very Reverend Dr. Tom Wright, who has now moved to Westminster abbey, pointed this out to me. I had avoided the great cliché of saying the last millennium, but I can certainly refer to the last year.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Fabricant: I shall certainly give way to my hon. Friend, whom I know to be an expert on dates, among so many other things.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend will recall that the right hon. Gentleman said only a few moments ago that he had displayed either grovelling sycophancy towards the Government or, at any rate, a suitable synonym for such

[Mr. Bercow]

grovelling sycophancy. Has he not just demonstrated, by his very sound attitude to the advent of the millennium next year, that he has done no such thing?

5.45 pm

The Temporary Chairman: Order. Interventions must be relevant, and must relate to the matter that we are debating. They should not be about whether we are or are not in the new millennium.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you for your advice, Mr. Winterton.

Last year, the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said that he had been consistent on this matter. He said, in fact, that he had said as early as 27 June 1984 that people who live overseas should not have the right to vote. However, his consistency does not necessarily mean that he is right. In fact, for once, the right hon. Gentleman may be desperately wrong. Those who live abroad—whether or not they pay United Kingdom tax—have an interest in the country whose nationality they choose to keep. If one chooses to live abroad, one may seek to become a citizen of the country where one lives. That does not necessarily bring tax disadvantages—it may bring an advantage—but if someone chooses to remain a citizen of the UK, he or she has an inherent interest in how the country is governed.

People may also have a fiscal interest, no matter whether they pay taxes in the UK. The rules of double taxation mean that someone who does not pay tax in the UK will still pay tax elsewhere. The Government claim—not always correctly—that they levy low taxation, although it is rising. There may be no fiscal advantage to living overseas. One may still have a financial interest in the UK if one is not paying tax here. Many people own property, although, of course, they pay property taxes. Many people have friends and relatives who pay tax. Many people who live overseas have trusts in the UK for the benefit of relatives or others, and those would be subject to UK taxation and affected by the economy and welfare of the nation. The whole point of voting at a general election is to try to decide what is best for our nation on tax, welfare and the economy.

It is fundamentally wrong to argue that those who live overseas should not have the right to vote. Despite the right hon. Gentleman's protestations, I believe that the amendment is politically motivated, and that is quite wrong. Over the years, it has been felt in the House of Commons that issues such as voting rights—whether by first past the post or proportional representation, for example—should be proceeded with by means of consensus. It is for that reason that the Committee stage is being taken on the Floor of the House rather than in Standing Committee.

The right hon. Gentleman's amendment is fundamentally wrong. We decide whether or not people should vote entirely according to their ability to make a choice. Voting is a function of age and ability. I believe that it is still illegal for people living in mental institutions to vote. There may be changes in the law, and perhaps the Minister would clarify the point.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Fabricant: They are not banned from voting?

Mr. O'Brien *indicated assent.*

Mr. Fabricant: In the past, there was a principle that those who had been committed could not vote.

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): I seek elucidation. Is not new clause 1 discriminatory in the sense that, if I were rich and lived abroad but could afford a home in this country—or owned a house on which I paid rates—I should be entitled to vote? I should be on the electoral register, even though I did not have to pay taxes because I should be in the country for only 12 weeks in a year. Surely, the new clause discriminates in favour of the rich, who can afford to have a second home in Britain. The central point seems to be that of citizenship—perhaps my hon. Friend can help me in this matter.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The central point is not whether people are rich or poor, but the perception of whether they are likely to vote Labour or Conservative. My hon. Friend, whose constituency almost abuts my own, is right to state that the whole question is one of citizenship. As I pointed out in my preamble, people who are prepared to remain part of the United Kingdom by retaining British citizenship, despite the fact that to do so might disadvantage them fiscally when they are living abroad, are proving their interest in the welfare of the UK. Is that not right? Surely, if one is a citizen of a democracy, one's most fundamental right is the right to vote.

It is all very well for Labour Members to say from time to time, "No representation without taxation"—a strange reversal of the war cry of the Americans when they sought independence—but that is not the case. Many poor people, who do not pay tax, voted Labour—quite rightly so. Sadly, after two and a half years, more poor people pay tax than was the case before the Government came to power. However, the Labour party does not claim that because people do not pay tax, they should not be allowed to vote. That would be a return to the 19th century.

Mr. Bercow: I do not think that my hon. Friend has entirely done justice to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd). Does he agree that this matter is extremely significant for the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman)? It would be a damning indictment of his amendment if its effect—deliberate or inadvertent—were to protect people living abroad who own property in this country, at the expense of people living abroad who do not.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct; the measure is discriminatory. We should discriminate on one factor and on one factor only: United Kingdom citizenship. If people choose to remain citizens of the UK,

whether that advantages or disadvantages them fiscally is irrelevant. If they remain members of the UK, there should be no discrimination against them; they should be allowed to vote.

Mr. Linton: The hon. Gentleman said that his hon. Friends the Members for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) are both right. In fact, they are both wrong. It is not enough to spend the night of 10 October in some residence in Britain in order to qualify for a vote; the qualification depends on where one is resident on that date. To be resident—whether for electoral or income tax purposes—one has normally to reside at a place. People who are normally resident overseas would not qualify for a vote in the UK, even if they owned a house in this country and spent the night of 10 October there. That has not been tested in the courts, but it is the understanding of electoral registration officers.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman is right. Technically, one has to be resident. After all, many Members of Parliament own more than one home, especially if their constituency is beyond commuting distance from Westminster. Technically, people have to be resident not only on the day, but on that very evening. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right on that point. However, we all know that, in practice, that is not the interpretation. Hon. Members or electors may not be at home on that night, so they may not be technically resident. In that case, the electoral returning officer might say, "Perhaps they are away on business or on holiday." The form is not filled in with the idea that one has to be present on that night.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): The point under discussion would have been clarified to some extent if my amendment to prevent double registration had been accepted. That would have made it clear that one is supposed to register where one is fully resident. It would have avoided having people flitting about—as MPs do—and being registered in different places. That was a worthwhile amendment; it would have helped to clarify new clause 1, which I hope to defend later.

Mr. Fabricant: I am not sure whether I shall vote with the hon. Gentleman—I shall listen to the arguments—but I have some sympathy with what he said last year. If the Government are to introduce, in due course, a national register of electors, that would be an especially effective way of ensuring that people do not vote twice in two constituencies for the same assembly—whether that be Parliament or one of the regional assemblies that I so abhor.

Mr. Bercow: I am sorry to trouble my hon. Friend again, but his speech is so interesting that it provokes interventions. As the law stands, and given the failure of the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), is not the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) factually wrong? At present, it is perfectly legitimate for people to be on the electoral register at two addresses, so long as they vote only in respect of one of them.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, I pointed out that if the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire had been accepted, it would have prevented someone from voting twice in two constituencies for one assembly. Perhaps we could have some clarification from Ministers of whether it is still legal for someone, such as a student, to vote twice for two different assemblies—that is, to vote at home with a postal vote for a local council and, in the same election, to vote for a different council in the university town in which he is living—I see that the Minister agrees. The hon. Gentleman's amendment would have ensured that there could not be multiple voting for the same assembly.

Mr. Linton: Just to ensure that the House does not suffer under a misapprehension, the definition of residence is not residing in a place for one night. According to the Inland Revenue, it is somewhere between residing there for more than half the year, which will guarantee that one is qualified for residence, and for a period from a quarter to one half of the year, which will entitle one to residence. That is why people can be resident in two places. That is why they can be resident overseas even though they spend a quarter of the year in this country. In an application for electoral registration, people can have dual registration—a practice to which my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) and I would like to see an end—but one cannot be resident overseas and have a vote in this country.

The Temporary Chairman: Order. I make another plea to the Committee for brief interventions, so that we can make progress.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) is right in the point that he makes about the Inland Revenue. That applies to the rules whether one is paying UK taxes, or paying only overseas taxes under a double taxation agreement. However, he is not correct in saying that just because that is the Inland Revenue's interpretation under finance legislation, it has any implication for residency rights under Representation of the People Acts. As I understand the matter—again I seek clarification from the Under–Secretary of State whose constituency almost abuts my own—it is the evening of 10 October that determines whether one is resident.

The measure is blatantly unfair. I have friends who have worked overseas for UK companies, in unpleasant climates and in unpleasant countries—I shall not say where—but who are very active in politics. Furthermore, the assumption that such people are always Conservative is patently wrong. I gave the example of the Minister who lived in South Africa, where he was brought up. He had an overseas vote and obviously voted Labour, or, in his case—for all I know—communist.

6 pm

Mr. Bercow: I think he was a Liberal.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend tells me that the hon. Gentleman is a former Liberal.

I have a friend from university who worked for Unilever and worked overseas, His father was general secretary of the north-east region of the Communist party. My friend used his postal vote. He told me that as there

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were no communists in the constituency in which he wanted to vote, he was forced to vote right wing, as he put it—he had to vote Labour. Therefore, the assumption that all overseas voters are Conservative is patent nonsense.

Nevertheless, the amendment is blatantly unfair. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) said, the whole test is that of citizenship. I firmly maintain that if one chooses—one does have choice in the matter—to remain a citizen of the United Kingdom, one has an interest in the United Kingdom. If one has an interest in the United Kingdom, one of the oldest democracies, with the second oldest Parliament—the oldest being the Althing in Iceland, which I have had the privilege of visiting several times—one has the right to vote, and that right should not be taken away.

The right hon. Member for Gorton says that it is wrong for Governments to ignore Select Committee reports. Unfortunately, Governments do. Some Select Committees are more listened to than others. A recent report by *The Guardian* gave marks according to the publicity that various Select Committees get, and it was interesting to note that every Select Committee got either nul points or one star, and only one Select Committee got four stars. That was, surprisingly, the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport. I suspect that both Conservative and Labour Governments listen to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee because it has the oxygen of publicity. The point that I wish to make, without going off the point, is that the Select Committees that seek obscurity sometimes deserve to be ignored by Governments.

I shall not try your patience any more, Mr. Winterton. Citizenship is the issue. If people choose to retain United Kingdom citizenship, they choose to belong to a mature democracy. A mature democracy offers its citizens voting rights, and those voting rights should not be taken away.

Mr. Barnes: I shall speak to the amendments that stand in my name, but first and foremost I want to support new clause 1 and the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), and to reinforce his opposition to schedule 2 standing part of the Bill. In fact, my amendments are merely fall-back provisions in case my right hon. Friend's attempts to abolish overseas electoral registration should fail. My fall-back provisions are to some extent pre-empted by clause 130 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, but they have been tabled in this Committee as fall-back measures and allow us to discuss the principles that they involve.

My name appears on the amendment paper in support of every one of my right hon. Friend's amendments. They show the clear, principled position to which we should adhere. I believe that people who move overseas become part of a fresh society, in the sense that they are subject to the laws and provisions of that society and will be linked with it by their family relationships. Their children are growing up in that society. Therefore the major things that happen to them depend on what is happening in that society—not on a few decisions on taxation taken in this country.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): That simply cannot be right, can it? It is the central feature of citizenship that one owes rights and obligations to the state in return for protection. If a person goes to live abroad and is arrested, that person continues to look to the British consular service for protection until he has taken the citizenship of another country. Surely that in itself is a justification for being allowed to keep the right to vote, and to influence elections, in the country whose citizenship one claims.

Mr. Barnes: That is not such a powerful argument. It is an argument about the nature of citizenship, links with this country and the services that a citizen expects, but why should a citizen who lives elsewhere expect the right to vote in his country of citizenship? Masses of other matters affecting a person's life are determined by the country in which he lives. Ideally, that is where the vote should be exercised while they are resident.

Hon. Members may remember that I introduced an amendment earlier to say that the names of overseas residents in this country, in addition to those from the Republic of Ireland and from the Commonwealth, should be on registers in this country. I believe that that applies to about 680,000 people. Therefore, the principle for which I am arguing is consistent with my earlier arguments. The argument that people should vote where their links and connections are is overwhelming. It overrides the arguments about citizenship. Citizenship is mentioned in a metaphysical sense as though it were the only thing that mattered in every set of circumstances and overrode every other consideration.

Under the rolling register proposed in the Bill, United Kingdom citizens who go overseas can immediately re-register once they re-enter the United Kingdom for residential purposes. If a citizen feels that he very much belongs to the United Kingdom, and is drawn to the United Kingdom at every opportunity but his work sometimes takes him elsewhere, that presents no problems. When he is in the UK, he can re-qualify again in order to register; the Bill allows that to be done very quickly.

We should not mix compulsory registration with a system of voluntary registration. Compulsory registration is democratically superior to voluntary registration. We should expect everyone in a society to be obliged to appear on an electoral register. It should then be their decision whether to exercise their franchise, but we should ensure that no one who is part of a society misses out.

Voluntary registers are obnoxious, because if we operated voluntary registers in this country, some groups would be included in the registers and others would be excluded. We would by no means have full democratic arrangements. Voluntary electoral arrangements overseas have the same failing. There is no mechanism by which we can oblige everyone who is overseas to register, and it is sensible not to mix up these two arrangements but to stick with the stronger principle—compulsory registration.

Compulsory registration ensures that those who are rootless, poor and alienated are incorporated into electoral systems. Voluntary registration would exclude them. If we operated such a system, it would be like the system that exists in America where there has been a massive lack of registration. The principle of compulsory registration rules out the arrangements for overseas registration.

In 1984-85—when, finally, a period of five years was established—my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton vigorously fought against the establishment of overseas registration rights. In 1989, that period was extended to 20 years. I had entered the House by then, and was one of a small group of Labour MPs who, at every conceivable opportunity, opposed the measure to try to extend the period, first to 25 years and then to 20 years. In 1989, I studied the speeches that my right hon. Friend had made in 1984-85—speeches from which he has quoted—and was glad to see that the Labour party had put up a vigorous battle in the House of Commons on these matters. I was only sorry that that did not occur on the later occasion, because there was at least an opportunity to say, "We shall go no further than the five-year provision."

The Labour rebels who attempted to hold the line at five years were consistent in their voting. There were six Divisions against the measure, including in Committee, on Second and Third Readings and on the money resolution. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the people who were the most involved in rebelling on those matters were all members of the socialist Campaign group. They voted four, five or six times against the measure. In fact, the only people who voted against it on six occasions were myself and Dave Nellist. People in the Labour party with democratic socialist principles that they extended to electoral arrangements were concerned by what was happening then. However, it might seem a strange alliance for someone from the socialist Campaign group to tuck in behind the amendments that were so vigorously moved by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton.

Mr. Kaufman: As my hon. Friend will know, I was at that time a member of the shadow Cabinet and, therefore, bound by collective responsibility. Had I not been, he would have had my company in the Division Lobby.

Mr. Barnes: I believe that that is the position that my right hon. Friend would have taken. I know that he was quite upset at the deal that Labour shadow Home Office representatives were engaged in. A low-level deal was reached to extend the provisions for postal and proxy votes and to increase the amount that could be spent on by-elections by allowing the Conservatives to increase the time that one could be out of the country for up to 20 years. That was entirely unacceptable.

Mr. Bercow: I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman, but I am anxious about his call for compulsory registration. What would he say to someone who felt at risk of violence and chose, however unfortunate it might be, to come off the register?

The Temporary Chairman: Order. The hon. Gentleman's intervention is not in order as it does not relate to the amendment. Unless he can prove that it does, I trust that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) will continue his speech.

Mr. Barnes: May I just say briefly that we have compulsory electoral registration in this country? That is the basis of our system. If Members do not agree with that system, they should table amendments to the Bill and use the other procedures of the House to change it.

Mr. Shepherd: In what way do we have compulsory registration in this country? My local authority makes inquiries and prints the register out on a pretty rote basis. However, there is no compulsion to register.

Mr. Barnes: If someone fails to register, he can technically be fined £1,000 for failing to fill in a registration form. Millions of people are missing from the electoral register, so it is obvious that this aspect of the law does not work all that effectively. I am not in favour of bearing down heavily on those who are not on the register. I support the Bill, which is trying to get the people who are missing from the register back on it.

The Temporary Chairman: Order. Bearing in mind the number of amendments that have been selected for debate, it is important that we have an orderly discussion. Will the hon. Gentleman please return to consideration of the amendment?

Mr. Barnes: I will now consider the amendments tabled in my name. So far, I have spoken to the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton, but to which my name has been attached.

6.15 pm

My amendments would restrict the period of the operation of the overseas vote to five or 10 years. The Select Committee on Home Affairs suggested that the period should be five years, and 10 years is the proposal which the Government have made in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. That proposal has been supported by the Liberal Democrats. However, I have also attached my name to amendment No. 82, which the Liberal Democrats' tabled and which would not allow someone who is not initially registered in this country to be registered overseas. At present, a babe in arms can be taken overseas and is able to vote in this country on his or her 18th birthday. The Liberal Democrat amendment would not permit that. Furthermore, a declaration should be signed by a person overseas to say that he or she intends to return to this country at the end of the 10-year period.

I have adopted the Liberal Democrats' proposals, in connection with the five-year provision, in amendment No. 119. It is a starred amendment, because I tabled it only yesterday. However, I want the principle in the Liberal Democrats' amendment to operate in connection with the five-year as well as the 10-year arrangement. I am a bit disappointed that the Government have chosen a separate Bill to deal with that item. It is perverse that we should discuss overseas votes and the period of time in which one can have an overseas vote under this Bill when the decision will be made in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which has the objective of amending this Bill. The House has yet to decide whether it will pass this Bill.

I hope that the Government will respond to my right hon. Friend's case and will end such undemocratic and unacceptable arrangements. If not, I hope that we shall provide for a shorter period for registration overseas that

[Mr. Barnes]

will contain the necessary checks. That will act as a staging post in clearing the matter up until my right hon. Friend's views win the day.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) referred to amendment No. 82, which was tabled by my hon. Friends and myself. However, it is not the lead amendment, which we began to debate last month and last year, if not to say in the previous century or millennium. It would not result in a trivia quiz question if the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) were involved, but he has probably made the longest interrupted speech that Parliament has heard for a long time. It began a month ago today and only finished this afternoon. I understand his position, but I disagree with it and take a different view.

When I intervened earlier, I was not special pleading on behalf of my older brother who was abroad but who has now returned to the United Kingdom. I used that case as an example of someone who had lived in the UK for a considerable part of his adult life and who had been sent by his employer to work abroad. He had no choice in the sense that that was there the job was; he could not go anywhere else. When the job finished, he returned. He never changed his intention to come back, but the question of how long he was outside this country was not in his hands. He happened to be in a Commonwealth country—Cyprus—but his case is replicated throughout the country. Anyone on any pay grade in any constituency could find himself in that position.

My hon. Friends and I reflected on what is not a theological position; there is no absolute view of what is right or wrong. Each country legislates appropriately. Commonality of legislation is an issue when it comes to voting for the European Parliament. If there is one set of rules in one country and another set in another, one begins to have a varied process for choosing representatives. However, let us put that issue aside for a moment. We are concentrating on elections in the UK and we are free to choose our own rules.

The right hon. Member for Gorton reminded us that we went from no overseas voting to it being allowed in a period of five or 10 years. A period of five years was decided on, but that suddenly shot up under the Conservative Government to 20 years. In the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, the Second Reading of which we debated on Monday, the Government now suggest that the period should be 10 years. I want to explore two or three issues in relation to that and urge the Minister to reflect that the distance between the Government's current position and ours is very small. If it is appropriate, I am happy for the matter to be considered under the other Bill and I hope that we can reach maximum consensus.

I intervened earlier on the right hon. Gentleman to clarify the history of this issue. I refer to the relevant and interesting example of Vale of Glamorgan, where the right hon. Gentleman's colleague was clearly turfed out by people who were not in the constituency at the time of the election. There is no suggestion that those people did not have a connection with the constituency. They voted by proxy and the evidence showed that many of them had declared themselves to be Conservatives, and clearly the majority determined the result. However, it appeared that they fell within the rules because they had a link with the constituency and were calling on someone local to act for them.

That is not nearly as awful as people looking at a map of the United Kingdom, choosing Vale of Glamorgan because it is a very marginal seat, and saying that they would exercise their franchise there, even though they had never had a link with the constituency. We must have a system in which people cannot pervert the normal process by choosing where they place their vote because that right is not open to everybody else. People who have one home or who qualify to vote on the basis of one home do not have freedom to choose where they vote, and no one else should have that freedom either.

Those who are abroad must have their vote in the place where they last had a link—this is where the argument about young people applies—otherwise there will be abuse of the system and the people who are resident in this country all the time feel that they are not equally valued.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: Yes, but I want to keep my contribution brief.

Mr. Fabricant: Is the hon. Gentleman implying that at the moment there is a mechanism whereby one does not have to have a local link? Surely the point is that to vote in a constituency one has to have a connection, and there is no way that someone could, as he said, scan the map to find a marginal constituency in which to vote.

Mr. Hughes: That point raises several issues. That should be the position, but I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that the law is not entirely clear about that. Secondly, we are debating what the law should be, and I want us to make sure that at the end of this process we make the law as clear as possible.

Thirdly, if we are to be fair and have a system that does not allow arbitrary choice, we cannot have a rule that allows people living in Cyprus or India, for example, who have not lived in this country since birth, suddenly to come on to the register at age 18 and pronounce where they will have their vote. I am flagging up the need to end up with an Act that makes sure that that problem is solved.

It is perfectly proper to have a debate about whether the criterion for voting should be citizenship or residence at the time of the election. If, at the end of the day, we decide that someone who is abroad and can vote nowhere else has sufficient connection with this country to vote here, we need to define that connection. There are several ways of doing so. The first is that the person concerned is a UK citizen and that he keeps his vote here no matter whether he has a right to vote elsewhere.

The second definition is that the person has a residence here and is based here, even though he may not be here very often. As the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) mentioned, that means that the person has a choice. That criterion would be discriminatory on the basis of property and wealth and should be rejected.

The third way of defining a connection is to ensure that before they leave the country people make a statutory declaration that they are leaving for a limited period.

Although that is not a perfect system, the declaration could be taken into account in other matters such as tax. There is every difference between people who leave this country to live somewhere else and say for tax purposes that they are not a UK resident, and people who have lodged in a public place a declaration to return. That declaration clearly has tax implications, so it is likely that people would not make it without thinking seriously about it.

The fourth way is to introduce a mechanism by which people can attest to the impermanence of their move abroad.

Mr. Greenway: On the hon. Gentleman's point that people who choose not to pay tax in this country should not be allowed to vote, has he considered that many of them choose not to pay tax in this country under double taxation agreements because they have to pay tax in the country where they are working, often for a British company?

Mr. Hughes: I have considered that, and I have discussed the subject with my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), who is much more expert in these matters than me. We have never pulled together in UK law, certainly not in English law, the various entitlements that people can have. They are entitled to certain rights because of their citizenship here; they have other entitlements because of their domicile here—domicile is a complicated area of legal definition—and they are given other entitlements by virtue of their residence here, but if they are well advised and know their way around the system, it is still possible in law for them to play the field and vote in a certain place and be exempt from tax or have their tax liability reduced.

I do not expect a portmanteau answer from the Minister now, and I appreciate that the Bill is concerned with electoral reform, not taxation, but we should try to use the opportunity to make sure that we do not have additional criteria that further complicate the rights and entitlements of people who go abroad and return home. At the moment, the law is complicated in defining people's liabilities to the state and their rights. We should at least ensure that people's entitlement to vote and obligation to pay tax flow as similarly as possible from the status of their residence, and are not made too complicated.

Mr. Grieve: That is simply impossible. A French national living in the United Kingdom, paying UK tax, would have no entitlement to vote. Unless we depart from the basic principle and extend the vote to all residents by making residency, not nationality, the sole criterion, we will never get the clarity that the hon. Gentleman seeks.

Mr. Hughes: Of course I understand that a French national living here may have taxation obligations here but not the right to vote, other than in European Union elections. I was simply saying that when we legislate to provide, in this Bill or the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, a new definition of people's right to vote here, we should make the whole system of rights and entitlements less, not more, complicated than it is now. To pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills, we should not end up with legislation that discriminates in favour of the well off and well advised. Everybody should have equal opportunity to exercise their franchise.

Mr. Bercow: I fear that the hon. Gentleman might not achieve the equity and simplicity that he seeks. Would not a requirement for a declaration of intent discriminate unfairly against those persons who, through no fault of their own, were not at the time of emigration in a position to know whether, and therefore when, they would return?

Mr. Hughes: I understand that. We are getting into a lot of detail, although in Committee we probably need to do so. All one can ever do is declare that, in so far as it lies within one's power, one intends to return. Some people are posted abroad indefinitely and of course they cannot say how long they will be away. That is the purpose of our probing amendment, No. 82, which would at least allow one to declare one's intention to return within 10 years. The hon. Gentleman could suggest the alternative proposition that one should be able to declare one's intention to return at the earliest date on which one's employment allows.

Mr. Linton: Is not the hon. Gentleman aware that the provision that he is defending is the very one that allows some people, including some who have been mentioned in this debate, apparently to vote in two countries and pay tax in neither?

Mr. Hughes: That is exactly why we need to try to pull together all the different pieces of legislation. The benefit of Committees such as the Home Affairs Committee, on which the hon. Gentleman sits and alludes to often, is that evidence can be taken and conclusions reached about how best we can do that.

The hon. Gentleman rightly reminds us that the Home Affairs Committee expressed the unanimous view that there should be a five-year rule. We argue for a 10-year rule not because we have a fundamental objection to the five-year proposition but because of the pragmatic consideration that in a global economy people move around more often and are away for longer periods. The more that we thought about it, the more we came to that conclusion.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that whichever conclusion we reach—the five or 10-year proposition or anything other than the stipulation that one cannot be absent at all, with which we began the debate—we may need to find a mechanism through which people may declare their intentions, such as a register kept for the purpose. Otherwise, the system will be open to abuse and misinterpretation.

Hon. Members want to deal with the crude abuse of the system by those who leave this country for ever, have no intention of returning and, to use the cliché, live a life of Riley on the Costa del Sol or Brava, or somewhere else, but continue to have a vote and the ability to influence this country. The public certainly regard that as an abuse of the system. If people are definitely returning to this country, and soon, or are planning to do so, that is one thing, but if they have retired or settled elsewhere, there must come an early point at which their interests and right to influence the political system move with them.

6.30 pm

Mr. Shepherd: I am concerned about the retirement element of the hon. Gentleman's argument. I notice in my constituency—I am sure that it is so for him, too—that, with early retirement, people are spending increasing time abroad. Taxation may be one reason, although for health reasons they may want a sunny climate. Nevertheless, their entire family and interests are still focused on the United Kingdom, they are not often integrated into local societies elsewhere, and, as they become older and often need medical advice, they return to the UK. Their link with the UK is clear, substantial and constant. Should they be deprived of the vote after 10 years?

Mr. Hughes: That is a valid question. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) took the original view that there should be no time limit. That is a perfectly proper alternative view at the other end of the spectrum to that of the right hon. Member for Gorton. To take the example given by the hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills, someone may retire early and live in Spain but never become a Spanish citizen. Their assets, savings, tax liability and family might remain in the UK, and they might always return due to illness or to recover or to die.

We are not rejecting the proposition because it is wrong; it is a matter of struggling, as a Committee, to find a mechanism that prevents abuse of the system by those who intend never to return and who take all their interests elsewhere, but protects those who retain an interest in this country. Our considered view was that the 10-year proposition was about right, but that there may need to be some way of checking its operation. Otherwise, people in such a bracket will have the advantage of a vote here even though they may be as certain on leaving that they will never return as those who have been away for two or 20 years. That is why a simple 10-year rule may not be sufficient.

At the end of the day, the Committee must come to a view. The major point of dissent from the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Gorton is on the basis that one should not lose one's right to vote here just because one is out of the country, especially when for family, commercial or business reasons one has no alternative but to make such a choice. I hope that the Committee will come to a different conclusion from the right hon. Gentleman's.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): This debate has opened up some interesting themes about citizenship, which are complex. Is one a citizen because one's bloodline is of a given nation, as say the Germans; one was born in the nation, as say the Americans; or for other reasons? I was nervous to hear the idea emerging from some quarters that the Inland Revenue should decide who is and who is not a British citizen.

I have some interest in this debate, as will many people who are listening to it or will read it on the net tomorrow. We should have some regard for the 9 million fellow British citizens who will take some interest in the proceedings of this Committee.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacShane: May I make a little progress? I am trying to be brief.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) began this excellent debate just before Christmas, but never could we have envisaged that the discoursus interruptus—if I may call it that—would cause such a follow-up, comprising many excellent contributions. He described himself as a grovelling sycophant. I hope that there is no one in the House who has greater admiration for his many talents than me.

Mr. Kaufman: I hope that there is.

Mr. MacShane: It takes one to know one.

Some might feel that my right hon. Friend was adopting a little Englander or anti-internationalist approach, but given his distinguished record as a shadow Foreign Secretary, his many wise writings on many aspects of international affairs and the deft way in which he managed to transport all his wonderful Select Committee to Hollywood for a lovely week of lying around on sun-loungers watching Hollywood films, one sees one of the great internationalists of the House and someone who knows the world intimately. However, it was not always thus.

In my right hon. Friend's wonderful book, "My Life in the Silver Screen", which I recommend to the Committee, he says that, as a boy,

"I saw numerous westerns, all of which"—

The Temporary Chairman: Order. All this might be extremely interesting and very accurate, but it is not relevant to the debate—unless the hon. Member makes its relevance clear in the next few moments, as I hope he will.

Mr. MacShane: I shall if I may, Mr. Winterton. This debate is about whether our many citizens who live overseas should have the right to vote.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacShane: No.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton tabled the amendment that will take away such citizens' right to vote. In his book, he says:

"I saw numerous westerns, all of which I enjoyed but none of which I could understand, as I had no idea in which country the West was situated".

He has moved on from those boyhood moments to become a great internationalist, so I am surprised that he is inviting hon. Members, for the first time since I became a Member, to reduce the franchise. I thought that, on the whole, the British Parliament had always increased the franchise.

Mr. Barnes: Labour has not always tried to extend the franchise. Property and university votes were done away with because they were wrong—and it is wrong in connection with overseas votes.

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend is talking about people who had two votes in elections to this Parliament, but I am talking about those who have only one. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and others propose to take away that vote.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacShane: I am trying to make maximum progress to allow others to make proper speeches.

There are 650,000 British citizens currently living in the European Union who have a very close connection with and an interest in what happens in this country. There are 214,000 service personnel who live overseas sometimes for quite long periods, as we know from other debates.

Mr. Kaufman: They all have proxy rights.

Mr. MacShane: They do not all have property rights.

Mr. Kaufman: Every British service man and service woman abroad has the right to apply for a proxy vote and to exercise it. My amendment would not deprive them of the right to vote.

Mr. MacShane: The point is that all British citizens overseas may at times of high emergency or war be placed under some control by the Government. It seems rather odd that we may theoretically invite them to make sacrifices for the country but not allow them to vote if they so desire.

There are 840,000 people receiving United Kingdom state pensions abroad, and those people are directly connected to this country. That is a valuable network of British citizens, and it does not matter whether or not they are residents in this country. When Palmerston enunciated the great doctrine of civis Britannicus sum, he did not say that it was necessary to reside at 24, Park villas in Gorton to have British citizenship.

The paradox is that we allow more and more people to vote in this country who are not holders of British passports. Every European Union citizen living in this country may vote in European Parliament and local government elections.

Mr. Fabricant: I agree with most of the hon. Gentleman's arguments, but I am rather confused about the motives for them. Are they to be regarded as sycophancy for the Government Front Bench or is he advancing them because he voted in overseas elections when he was living in Switzerland?

Mr. MacShane: I could not vote in Switzerland when I lived there briefly.

I return to the key point. It has been suggested that we take away the right to vote from our own passport holders, but we are extending that right to nationals of foreign countries in this country. Every Irish citizen who comes here has the right to vote and, indeed, to stand for Parliament. I have no problems with that because it is a tribute to the tolerance of this country. It is wrong to reduce the right to vote to our passport holders when we extend that right to so many nationals of foreign countries who are foreign passport holders.

It is all the more perverse to reduce the right to vote of our citizens abroad when other countries are seeking to extend the right to vote of their citizens who are abroad. I expect that later this year we shall all on the Government Benches go to parties organised by Democrats Abroad, as they seek to get support for their candidates in the American election. Conservative Members may go to parties organised by Republicans Abroad. No American citizen has his right to vote taken away from him because he lives abroad. German citizens are allowed to live abroad for 25 years before the right to vote is taken away from them. Spain allows all its citizens abroad to vote. Italy and Switzerland have recently changed their constitutions to allow their citizens abroad to vote. Many more citizens of all countries, including the United Kingdom, are living in the European Union or further abroad. It must be recognised that we now live in a more global economy and society.

A day or two ago my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton told me that the man who makes excellent salt beef sandwiches in St. John's Wood flies home to Israel to vote. I presume that he is an Israeli citizen and that he does not lose the right to vote because he provides excellent salt beef sandwiches in St. John's Wood.

India allows all of its citizens who are abroad to vote. The many Indian passport holders who live in this country can vote in their elections back home.

There are two more brief arguments with which I must deal. There is the question of residence and whether only one address should count. That would certainly present problems to Members of this place. When I was the local Labour party secretary in the Birmingham, Selly Oak constituency, I was encouraged to get all the students on to the electoral roll. Labour won that seat with the help of the students' votes in 1974. We lost it in 1979 because the students momentarily, or for another 18 years, swung back to the right.

Plumping is important and it needs to be dealt with by regulation. That is plumping in the sense of, for example, people putting all their votes into Vale of Glamorgan or any other particular place.

I do not know whether the amendment will be pressed to a Division. If it is, I ask the House of Commons not to send the message contained within it to our citizens who are working overseas. They might do so for a few years or for much longer. They are British citizens and we are proud of them. We shall not take from them the fundamental expression of citizenship in the modern world, which is the right to participate in the democratic process.

6.45 pm

Mr. Grieve: I do not always agree with the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), but on this occasion I agree wholeheartedly with his remarks. I apologise to the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) because although I was present for the start of his speech before Christmas, I missed part of the middle and end of it this afternoon.

We have dwelt on citizenship, which is a key factor in whether someone should be allowed to vote. Some surprising arguments have been advanced because they seem to denigrate citizenship and to suggest that it is only a series of privileges to be abused. As Lord Haw Haw discovered to his cost, the abuse of his privilege of obtaining a British passport in 1940 before he zipped off to Germany to make his broadcasts cost him rather dear. He abused his citizenship rights and paid the penalty.

Citizenship carries rights and obligations. Someone who installs himself for 40 years in a foreign country but chooses to keep his British citizenship is retaining a privilege and a right that may be useful to him in terms of consular access if he has difficulties, but one that

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places him under obligations. When someone is under obligations to a state, surely that gives him a right and an entitlement to have a voice in the way in which that country is run. It is a fundamental issue. The argument that is advanced by the right hon. Member for Gorton and others who wish to get rid of this right surprises me.

In part, I have a French background. I contrast the approach that appears to be adopted by France and the attitudes that seem to be advanced by the right hon. Gentleman. If a French citizen is overseas, that is seen as a great plus. He is out in the wider world and perhaps representing the interests of France for as long as he may be able to promote them. The French invite such people to their embassies every 14 July. They send newsletters to keep in touch with them and they encourage them to vote. They try to involve them as much as possible in the life of their country, with which they may have only the remotest contact.

Curiously, we have before us another form of Frenchness. I do not think that I have ever heard a greater series of Poujadiste arguments than those that have been put forward this afternoon in favour of getting rid of the overseas electoral register. They are all about people who are supposed to be milking the milch cow. It is alleged that they are abroad because they cannot pay tax. It is suggested that they are enjoying privileges while not fulfilling their obligations. Such a mean-minded set of reasons for getting rid of the overseas right to vote has rarely been heard.

Mr. Fabricant: I could not help but intervene on my hon. Friend when he mentioned that he is half French, given my surname, which is of French origin.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the French encourage their nationals to visit their embassies when abroad because although they may not be paying French tax, when they are working for French companies they are earning money for the French economy for the benefit of that nation? British embassies and commissions abroad do the same for our nationals who are working abroad. Although such people are not paying tax, they are still contributing to the welfare of the United Kingdom and therefore should be entitled to the vote.

Mr. Grieve: I agree with my hon. Friend, but this issue goes wider than that. Someone living abroad may feel sufficiently connected with the United Kingdom to retain his citizenship. He may be a dual national, and dual nationals may vote in elections in two countries at once. If such a person feels sufficiently connected to be prepared to maintain the obligations of citizenship, it appears to me fundamental that that should give him an entitlement to be heard on how the country is run. It is as simple as that.

Mr. Barnes: For how many years?

Mr. Grieve: I would not have quibbled with the 20-year rule, but I note with interest that the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) has suggested that it should be for as long as citizenship is maintained. As an issue of principle, I do not disagree with that one iota, although I would not necessarily interfere with the present system.

There is a degree of mean-mindedness in the whole approach. As the hon. Member for Rotherham rightly said, it is profoundly ironic that, at a time when we have extended the franchise to large numbers of residents who have, for one reason or another, chosen not to take up the obligations of nationality and British citizenship, the amendment would deprive people who usually feel intimately connected with this country, loyal to it and interested in its well-being, of the right to vote. It would amount to kicking them out. I am wholly against it. The amendments are ill-considered, and I hope that the Committee rejects them.

Mr. Greenway: Arguments on the rights of United Kingdom citizens overseas to vote in parliamentary elections in this country have been well rehearsed and documented over a long period. This debate, like previous debates on the Bill, has been characterised by references to the history of the past 15 years or so on this and other electoral issues.

The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), who proposed this amendment, made his position clear on Second Reading and in the debates on both sides of the Christmas recess. A study of the official record shows that he has, as he has always maintained, never been enthusiastic about this measure, and was unhappy about it in 1984. The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) and a former Member, Mr. Dave Nellist, whom we all miss, have been absolutely consistent throughout all the debates.

The right hon. Member for Gorton has two difficulties. First, although he may say that he has always opposed this measure, he was a senior member of the shadow Cabinet in 1989 when, at the instigation of the then Opposition, the current 20-year rule was introduced by an amendment. Reference has been made to the fact that he was the shadow Foreign Secretary at that time, so he cannot walk away from joint responsibility for the decision that was taken.

I suspect that in years to come, we will learn what views he expressed to Lord Hattersley, who as shadow Home Secretary sanctioned the tabling of the 20-year rule amendment by his junior colleague, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling). It is worth reminding the Committee of what he said in 1989. He said:

"a number of people will leave this country perhaps to . . . work in Europe or in other parts of the world but will still maintain a lively interest in the affairs of this country."

He went on to say that it was right that they should retain the right to vote and added:

"I believe 20 years is a sensible compromise".—[*Official Report*, 5 July 1989; Vol. 156, c. 411.]

That has been the settled position ever since.

The right hon. Member for Gorton has a second, more contemporary difficulty. As he admitted, his party does not agree with him. The excellent contribution from the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) shows that there is some good sense on this issue among Labour Back Benchers. I greatly applaud what he said. *[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, he makes a gesture that seems to show that, rather than being sycophantic, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) suggested, he may have done himself some damage. As a fellow Yorkshire Member, he has not

done himself any damage as far as I am concerned. It is always good for us to have a supporting contribution from Labour Members.

I also want to comment on the Liberal Democrat view. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) spoke to the Liberal Democrat amendments. We know what the right hon. Member for Gorton thinks, and it looks like we know what the Government think, but we are less clear about the Liberal Democrat position. In 1989, the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan) argued that there should be no limit on overseas voting rights. I shall not detain the House with direct quotations, but anyone who studies *Hansard* will see that his position was unequivocal.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey accepted that, but seemed to suggest that there was now evidence of abuse and that that was why the Liberal Democrat position should change. In this debate, and when we touched on this issue on Second Reading on 30 November, no one has produced a shred of evidence of abuse. It has all been general innuendo. People have taken the opportunity to air their dislike of overseas voters having any rights.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that the implicit suggestion of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) that Britons living abroad are ordinarily ignorant about what is taking place in this country was never true, and is likely to be even less true now with the development of technology in general and the internet in particular? Such people are often very well informed about the affairs of this country.

Mr. Greenway: As always, my hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. I shall come on to the changed circumstances of the world as it is now, because I agree with him that, if anything, it should encourage us to be more generous to British citizens living overseas and not less, as the amendment asks us to be.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman knows that I understand the argument for an indefinite right. If he is arguing for that, does he accept that it should at least be qualified by a requirement to establish whether persons who have left these shores want to retain their link with this country and intend or hope to come back one day?

Mr. Greenway: I have not argued for an indefinite right. I reminded the House that that is what the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross argued for in 1989. I am arguing that the settled position that was reached by the House in 1989 should remain. I shall come on to other aspects of the debate, which may answer some of the hon. Gentleman's other points.

I want the hon. Gentleman to concentrate a little more on his own position. The Liberal Democrats support a 10-year limit in the amendments to which they have put their names. Their then home affairs spokesman, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), said as recently as September that it should be seven years. On Second Reading, when this matter came up, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey advocated caution and further consultation. He said:

"We must not act in haste and repent at leisure."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 340, c. 192.]

Yet here we are, less than five working weeks later, being asked to accept a high-falutin amendment that suggests that people should sign a declaration before going abroad, and reintroduces the argument about taxation.

7 pm

That is another issue on which the Liberal Democrat view has changed dramatically. In the 1989 debates, the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross was scathing about the suggestion of a Labour Back Bencher that there should be a taxpaying requirement. I consider the proposal of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey to be as nonsensical and impractical now as it was then. United Kingdom citizens move to live abroad—in many cases, because of their work. They may or may not pay tax, depending on their circumstances. Double taxation agreements are there to protect citizens of all countries, and to ensure that they need not pay tax twice. They choose to pay tax in the third country rather than here to avoid double taxation, not so that they can walk away from any obligations that they may have to the United Kingdom. Many expatriates working abroad would be both disadvantaged and disfranchised by the Liberal Democrats' proposal.

United Kingdom citizens who go abroad because of their work, often at short notice, experience a huge amount of disruption in their personal and domestic lives. It is doubtful whether they will give much thought to their voting rights, and they are unlikely to give priority to signing the declaration proposed in amendment No. 82.

Mr. Fabricant: Will my hon. Friend give way briefly?

Mr. Greenway: I will give way one last time.

Mr. Fabricant: Would not the signing of such a declaration be a pointless exercise in any event? People who wanted to retain the vote, and to make a declaration, could do so, even if they intended to remain abroad for any length of time. This is woolly thinking, which, if I may say so, is typical of the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Greenway: I am glad that I allowed my hon. Friend to intervene.

We live at a time of increased globalisation. More and more people in all walks of life—and, I dare say, in all classes—are moving to live and work abroad; and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) reminded us, the internet has led to additional globalisation, and allowed people who still have British passports and British citizenship to be fully informed about what is happening in their country of origin.

People who leave to work abroad often do so on a temporary basis, not knowing whether and in what circumstances the move may become permanent. We strongly believe that those people, as United Kingdom citizens, have a right to expect the House of Commons to protect their interests, which include their right to vote in parliamentary elections. The hon. Member for Rotherham made that point forcefully. What Parliament and the Committee must decide is for how long that voting right should remain. Until recently, the status quo of 20 years was regarded as a settled position, and we see no real case for change. The Government have argued that there should be no change to the franchise in the Bill, because

[Mr. Greenway]

it implements the recommendations of the working party. We hope that the Minister will confirm that that is still the Government's view.

There were no discussions, and consequently there was no consensus in favour of the change, in the working party, but the Government have decided to include an amendment to 10 years in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which will implement the recommendations of the Neill committee. That committee, however, did not consider the issue either. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) made that point forcefully during Monday's Second Reading debate, but neither the Home Secretary nor the Under-Secretary of State chose to respond to it.

The report of the Select Committee, of which both the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield are members, will show that Mr. Gardner, who gave evidence on behalf of the Labour party on overseas voting rights, told the Committee that a reduction in the 20-year entitlement was not a priority for Labour. We consider the argument that the franchise issue is closely linked with the funding issue, which the Home Secretary advanced on Second Reading of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill on Monday, to be both spurious and insulting. Those issues should be considered separately.

This week, the Government promoted a Bill that suggested that voting rights should continue for 10 years. Now, we are about to hear the Minister argue that the right should be retained for 20 years. The Minister has admitted to me in written answers that the Government have made no estimate of the number of people who will be affected by the change. We think that it is around 3 million; the hon. Member for Rotherham said that it could be as many as 9 million. Surely that alone is an argument for thinking again before lowering the limit. I apologise for singling out the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, but anyone who heard his speech will realise that the proposals that we are being asked to accept have not been thought through.

The right hon. Member for Gorton and the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire were consistent to an extent, but there are fundamental disagreements between us. Given the confusion, argument, counter-argument and profound concern about the political motivation for any proposed change, the Government should have consulted before proposing 10 years in the Bill that was debated on Monday. We have said that we will support the Neill Bill, but support for that Bill should not be seen as support for the argument in favour of 10 years. Today's debate has shown that more thought is needed.

If the 20-year rule is reduced or, worst of all, abolished, Parliament will disfranchise British citizens for the first time since 1832. This is a shameful, spiteful, mean-minded and ill-judged proposal that the Committee should reject.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) on his robust and eloquent speech, but I would have expected nothing else. My right hon. Friend is known to be a doughty campaigner for the causes that he champions, and he has considerable knowledge and experience of electoral law—as, indeed, does my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes). I also listened with interest to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who put his case very well. Some of the issues that he raised are worthy of further consideration.

Having said that, however, I must add that I have been reminded somewhat of Sherlock Holmes's "dog that did not bark in the night" in the case of Silver Blaze. We have spent a good deal of time, before Christmas and this afternoon, discussing an issue that does not currently feature in the Bill—and, in my view, should not feature in it.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made it clear on Second Reading that he believed that the rights of overseas voters and, in particular, the time that they should be allowed to remain on an electoral register after leaving the United Kingdom were serious issues that needed discussion. They are contentious issues, as has been shown by today's debate. He said that the Government hoped that, if possible, any changes in the period should be made on the basis of consensus. Most important, he suggested that such discussions should take place in the context of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. That Bill contains a provision that would reduce the period for overseas voters to 10 years, as we discussed during its Second Reading on Monday.

As today's discussions have demonstrated, the right to be on the electoral register is in many ways closely tied to the issue of who may make donations to political parties. That is one good reason why it would be better to leave discussion of the 20-year rule to the other Bill. I have no doubt that we can expect a lively debate on the issue at that time.

Another reason is that the Representation of the People Bill is intended to give effect to the recommendations of the working party on electoral procedures, which, I remind the Committee, was an all-party group that proceeded on the basis of consensus. With the small exception of the new false particulars offence in schedule 5, we have deliberately avoided going beyond the recommendations of the working party. The amendments would breach that principle.

The Government hope that the Bill will receive a fair wind in its passage through both this House and another place. That will enable the first innovative pilot schemes to be run at next May's local government elections. That timetable would be jeopardised if we embarked on consideration of a potentially controversial issue such as the time during which overseas voters may claim the right to vote. In the light of what I have said and in the knowledge that there will be an opportunity for full discussion of those issues, I invite my right hon. and hon. Friends and other hon. Members not to press the amendments to a vote.

I do not want to advance all the arguments. We have had much discussion today and I know that the Committee wishes to move to other important issues, but we take the view that 20 years is probably too long. People who have been away for effectively a generation may have little or no knowledge of contemporary issues in the constituency in which they vote. It is difficult to argue that a person should vote in an election for a Government of whom he has not been a subject for 20 years. However, as the

period away decreases to 10 years, the argument for reducing the period loses some of its strength. Although it may have some force, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton said, it has less force than that for reducing the 20-year period.

Mr. Brady: Has the Minister considered the position of pensioners who may have contributed taxes and national insurance throughout their working lives, who then go to live overseas—but depend on pensions, the level of which might be fixed by the House and by the British Government? Surely those people have a right to be enfranchised and to have a say, given that they have contributed not to a fully paid fund, but to something that will have variable benefits to be paid by decision of the Government. Those people should have some say in the matter.

Mr. O'Brien: There are strong arguments on both sides. Some people say, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton did, that people should live in the country in which they vote for the Government. Others say that people may live outside the UK; be retired outside the UK, having contributed during their working lives; be abroad on business; or work for the United Nations, the European Union, charities overseas or commercial organisations, important as those are.

7.15 pm

Many of those people may retain homes in this country. Their children may go to school here. Many may have a clear intention to remain permanently here in future. Many may retain, as has been said in previous debates on the issue, a lively interest in affairs here. There is an argument that we should not deny them a vote. However, others who are resident abroad, perhaps for tax or other reasons, have no intention of ever returning here, yet for 20 years they are entitled to vote. There is arguably some unfairness in that.

It is difficult to create complex criteria that would be fair to everyone. People are so multifaceted and live in such a multitude of circumstances that any test that tries to apply to all of them would be so unnecessarily complicated that it would end up being arbitrary. We have concluded that although 20 years is too long, 10 years is a compromise that we hope the House will eventually be able to accept. There is an argument for ensuring that such debates do not cause unnecessary dispute. It is right that they be lively, but it is also right that the franchise and elections should not be the subject of substantial unnecessary dispute, with Governments chopping and changing after every election the way in which the franchise operates.

There are strongly held views and we need to look for a balance. The proposed reduction of the qualifying period for registration as an overseas voter from 20 to 10 years is a balanced and equitable response to the recommendations of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. As the Committee unanimously recognised, the existing 20-year qualifying period is excessive. It recommended restoring the original five-year qualifying period, but that may go too far in the other direction. As I have said, many people who work abroad for international organisations may reside abroad for more than five years, but have every intention of returning permanently. A reduction to 10 years strikes a balance.

I want to make it clear that it is not a question of making it difficult for particular individuals to make donations. The Government have reached a view on the matter on the basis of principle and of trying to achieve consensus.

Mr. Grieve: There is no consensus.

Mr. O'Brien: We are trying to bring about some sort of consensus. I accept that, as has been demonstrated in the debate, a consensus does not exist at the moment, but, as we progress, I hope that we will be able to come at least to a compromise, if not a consensus.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton has asked whether clause 130 is set in stone or whether the Government will continue to think about it. We have always listened with great care to his views. I urge him to withdraw his amendment now and we will listen with care to his views during consideration of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. We have a considered view, but we will continue to listen. Perhaps our view is not set in stone, but it is a considered view. We will continue to listen to the debate. I hope that, on that basis, he will feel able to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Barnes: I hope that one of the groups that will not be greatly listened to in connection with overseas votes is the Conservative party and the Conservative Front-Bench team. When a measure was introduced in 1989 to extend the period to 25 years, and it was set at 20, the Conservative party tried to destroy electoral registration in this country through the linking of the poll tax to the electoral register. That led to 1 million people not being enfranchised.

Mr. O'Brien: I must make it clear that we listen to all views if they are properly put forward. We will listen to them with proper care. If they are put forward in a less than considered way, we will give them the credit that is due.

The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) asked about people in mental hospitals. People who are detained in mental hospitals are not, and never have been, banned from voting. However, they have been effectively disfranchised as they have not been able to register in respect of the hospital where they reside. The Bill would remedy that anomaly.

The hon. Gentleman raised citizenship issues, as did the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve). However, although citizenship issues are important, they are not the only issues. In parliamentary elections, people who may be able to vote include British citizens, some Commonwealth citizens, Irish citizens and some overseas electors—who may also, of course, be citizens of other countries. In European parliamentary elections, British, Commonwealth and European Union voters—including Irish voters—may be able to vote. Different rules apply in local government elections. The issues are, therefore, neither simple nor attached only to citizenship. Moreover, there are restrictions on who is able to vote, based on age and various other factors.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey asked whether overseas voters would be able to pick and choose their constituency. People must be registered at the last address at which they were registered

[Mr. O'Brien]

in the usual way. People who were too young to be on the register when they lived in the United Kingdom must be registered at an address where they previously lived and where a parent or guardian was registered.

Therefore, to some extent, there is already a requirement for a constituency link—which the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey is seeking to strengthen—and that is one of the issues that we shall be able to address in our consideration of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. The hon. Gentleman will be able to make his arguments then. There may well be ways of strengthening and making clearer the role of that link. Although I am currently not convinced that using the Inland Revenue is the best means of accomplishing that goal, we shall continue to listen with great care to the arguments being made.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) urged us not to legislate in haste on the issue and repent at leisure. However, we have a little more leisure time to consider the matter—at least until we again consider the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill. Strong arguments have been made on both sides of the franchise issue, and we shall have to try to reach if not a consensus, at least—to take the points made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield—a compromise, so that we are able to go forward with some sense that we have achieved fairness.

On that basis, I hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gorton will withdraw his amendment, and that the hon. Members who tabled the other amendments will not press them.

Mr. Kaufman: The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) and some other Conservative Members have said that the franchise should be based on citizenship, and that, if that happens, there should be no terminal period for that franchise. However, the Conservative party—which those hon. Members have voted for and supported at every level—has imposed such limits. Therefore, the principle that those hon. Members support—I respect their right as individuals to support it—has not been supported by the Conservative party in government.

The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) mentioned confusion on the issue, and said that he is opposed to chopping and changing policy. However, the Government whom he supported consistently chopped and changed on the issue. At various times, the previous Government offered the House four different time limits on the overseas vote: five years, seven years, 20 years and 25 years. It is therefore perfectly clear that Conservative Members do not regard time limits as a matter of principle; if they did, they would have decided on a figure and stuck to it. They seem to regard time limits as a convenience, or as something that they can get away with.

Some hon. Members, such as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve), described overseas voting as a cherished right and the obligations of citizenship. However, overseas voting is not an obligation but an option. Moreover, it is an option that barely anyone takes up—although the results of people taking it up may be extremely invidious.

With deep affection, I tell my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) that he still needs to learn a lesson or two in sycophancy.

Mr. Grieve: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: No, I shall not give way; the Committee wishes to conclude this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham described 9 million people and 840,000 pensioners who potentially could be overseas voters. The hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) also mentioned pensioners' interests. If 840,000 pensioners are concerned about their pensions—the hon. Gentleman did not seem to be aware that those people's pensions are frozen when they move residence from the United Kingdom—and feel strongly about the issue, they could register to vote. We could have 840,000 overseas voters who are pensioners.

Mr. Brady: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kaufman: No. If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I should like to wind up.

In fact, of the 9 million potential overseas voters mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham, and of the 3 million people mentioned by the hon. Member for Ryedale, 13,000 people are registered. We are speaking, therefore, not about an inalienable right, but of an option that only a handful of people decide to exercise, with possibly highly invidious results—including, as we know, the defeat of my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith).

I can therefore tell my hon. Friend the Minister that, in response to his request, I shall withdraw my amendment. He said that he wants a consensus—which is fine—but I should be very grateful if he took into account the fact that consensus does not simply mean agreement between Ministers and Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members, but also agreement between Ministers and Labour Back Benchers. Provided that Ministers realise that 350 Labour Back Benchers have at least as great a vote as 160 Conservative Members—their number seems to be decreasing—and 46 Liberal Democrat Members, and that we have at least twice as much right as Opposition Members to participate in a consensus, I believe that the Minister's promise to listen might result in something that is acceptable to all of us.

On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clauses 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 and 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 4

RESIDENCE: PATIENTS IN MENTAL HOSPITALS WHO ARE NOT DETAINED OFFENDERS OR ON REMAND

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Clause 4 is the result of work done by the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and his colleagues on the working party, seeking to correct clear civil disadvantages that have quite wrongly

been imposed on some of our fellow citizens. As mentioned earlier in the debate, the provision will enable those who are in mental hospitals, but who are not detained as offenders or on remand, to vote.

One of the last scandals of the old mental institutions—asylums—is that those who were physically ill and in hospital could vote, provided that they arranged to do so through a postal or proxy vote, whereas those who were in a mental hospital were not able to do so. That was disgraceful.

I should like simply to acknowledge that clause 4 will ensure that we remove some of the remaining stigmas attached to mental illness, and that it will make it absolutely clear that the distinction should be between those who have committed offences and are locked up because they are offenders, and those who may have temporarily lost their liberty or who are unable fully to exercise their liberty simply because they are mentally ill. It is a bit of enlightenment that should have occurred before the first year of the new millennium—if that is what it is—but it has come, and we welcome it.

Mr. Fabricant: I support this clause. MIND, which also supports the clause, estimates that 50 per cent. of those concerned would now be entitled to vote, and that the remaining 50 per cent. would benefit from the changes to the voting rules set out in the clause. That is all right and good. Judi Clements, chief executive of MIND, says:

"For decades, thousands of detained patients have been denied the fundamental right to vote, that the vast majority of us take for granted. This could be a huge victory for the many people who could play their part as UK citizens."

It is interesting to note that the word "citizens" is used, given the earlier debate.

7.30 pm

MIND has also backed a controversial plan to extend the vote to mentally ill people who have been through the criminal court—a subject that was dealt with earlier. Judi Clements said:

"This is a far smaller number, but it is inconsistent to give some people on psychiatric wards the vote and not others. They are not being held in prison, but in hospital."

I disagree with that. If persons have committed crimes, the fact that they are in a mental hospital as opposed to prison is an inconsistency. It is right that the Government agree with that and have said that, as those who have committed a criminal offence and are detained in prison are not allowed to vote, the same should apply to those held in a mental hospital.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Surely if somebody is so confused that they are in a mental hospital, they are too confused to determine whether they should vote for the Conservatives, the Labour party, the Liberals or any other party.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. With the greatest respect to my hon. Friend—for whom I have the highest regard—he is labouring under a delusion about the numbers and the sort of people who enter mental hospitals. An interesting statistic is that 25 per cent. of people in the UK will, in the course of their lives, suffer from mental illness—although, of course, only a minority will go, either voluntarily or by force, into a mental hospital.

Many such people are not confused at all. Many suffer from anxiety or depression, but not from dementia. Many do not suffer from psychoses such as schizophrenia, which might induce confusion. If I can remember some of my university studies on schizophrenia; there is catatonic, simple and hebephrenic—there are so many different types of schizophrenia, most of which do not involve confusion, as such. My elongated answer to my hon. Friend's reasonable point is that the vast majority of those in mental institutions are easily able to determine which way they wish to vote.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I wish to support the hon. Gentleman and allay the concerns of the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). Does the hon. Gentleman agree that many people who may be too ill to concentrate on voting because of periodic mental illness recover from that quickly—schizophrenia is a good example—just as many are too ill to vote when they are in hospital for a physical ailment? People are not taken off the register because they go into a coma or have an operation.

Many elderly people in the constituency of the hon. Member for Blaby—indeed, in all of our constituencies—in theory may not be as capable of voting as many others. However, there are provisions for dealing with them, such as proxy voting and voting by post. Eventually, if they decide that they are not up to it, they will not do it. However, we cannot categorise one group as being more incapable than another.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman raises a sound point. It is difficult enough for doctors to diagnose various types of mental disorder, without the Government or Parliament trying to diagnose, for the doctor's sake, those who may or may not be temporarily confused. Most people listening to the soundbites and spin from the Labour party are confused most of the time—I certainly am.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): I was always under the impression that the reason why people in mental hospitals were excluded from the right to vote was that it was held that they were not capable of making a rational decision. If that is incorrect, I am glad to be corrected. However, we are talking about a group of people who, by any standard, need care because of their mental condition—perhaps throughout their life. Under the changes that are now being made, where do they stand if they are in a mental hospital?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman raises a fascinating point. The course of mental illness changes, and people can go in and out of confusion as the course of treatment varies. At one time, certain types of schizophrenia were seen to be permanent. However, with drug treatment and a suitably effective regime, people can drift into and out of consciousness in terms of their ability to make a rational decision on casting their vote.

The hon. Gentleman said that, in the past, it was felt that people in mental institutions should not be allowed to vote. I remind him not only that that was a function of people's prejudices against those spending time in mental institutions, but that there were times in the 1920s when people were put into institutions simply because they had given birth to a child out of wedlock. People were put into mental institutions in the Soviet Union simply

[Mr. Fabricant]

because they disagreed with their Government. Not only do we have the problem of deciding who is and who is not capable of voting in a mental institution—and at what time they are capable of voting—but there can be doubt as to whether some people should be in a mental institution or not.

The Government have moved with the times on this matter, and I am pleased that my Front-Bench colleagues support the clause.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): I thank the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for raising this issue, which was liable to have passed almost unnoticed. As he rightly said, clause 4 is also about residence, but with reference to the registration of detained and voluntary mental patients.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) was labouring under a misapprehension. At present, voluntary mental patients are entitled to register at their home address by means of a patient's declaration. This clause removes that requirement. It also enables all patients in mental hospitals, other than those who are detained as a result of criminal activity—an important qualification—to register in respect of the hospital, if they are liable to be there for some time, or at some other address, such as the address where they would be living if they were not in hospital.

It is important that people resident in mental hospitals, whether they are voluntary or detained patients, should have the same right to register as anybody else. The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) talked about confusion, and his point was well answered by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). Mental illness is not a static condition, and it can move over time. To rule someone out, or to make legal judgments about the state of someone's mental health on a continuing basis, would be inappropriate. It would also be a minefield in terms of electoral law.

We must therefore assume that most of those in a ward or a special hospital are there on the basis that they have a condition that may or may not be curable, but that they should enjoy more or less the same rights of citizenship as everybody else, including the right to vote.

Mr. Grieve: I wholly agree with the Minister. We all know from experience in our constituency surgeries that some of the people who come to see us are not in mental hospitals but are clearly in a state of confusion that would make it impossible for them to exercise their right to vote, but we do not take them off the electoral register. I am convinced that many people who are detained under the Mental Health Acts are perfectly capable of rationally exercising a right to vote, so in amending the law as the clause does we are removing an anomaly and a stigma that are quite unnecessary.

Mr. Howarth: I agree. My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) and I share an interest in Ashworth special hospital, which is in my constituency. Some of the well-known patients are in there because of a criminal conviction, but others are there simply because they need a period of help to overcome difficulties with their mental health. It would be wrong for those who are there, possibly for a short time but possibly for quite a protracted period, to be excluded from the franchise.

It is important that those who are resident in a mental hospital, whether they are detained or voluntary patients, should have the same right to register as anybody else. There is no reason why people should be disfranchised because of their mental health. I hope that the consensus that we have established will hold, and I commend the clause to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 5

RESIDENCE: PERSONS REMANDED IN CUSTODY ETC.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Simon Hughes: This clause is also an improvement. In the past, if one was unconvicted in prison, one had the right to vote in theory, but that right would normally be registered at one's home, so in fact one would lose one's vote because if one was in prison at the time of registration, no one would do anything about it.

Those of us who have prisons in our constituencies—I am not one, but I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) has the largest number of prisoners in his constituency—may suddenly inherit a large number of voters in the form of the unconvicted prisoners temporarily resident in one of Her Majesty's institutions. It is clearly right to give people the right to vote where they are, and if they are unfortunately resident on remand in a prison for several months, that is where they should be able to vote.

People on remand are often of very little fixed abode elsewhere, and the prison may be the most permanent residence that they have had for some time. The measure will not affect huge numbers, but it brings into the political process people who were previously kept out, which is welcome.

Mr. George Howarth: As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, the clause is designed to make it easier for people who are remanded in custody to register as electors. Remand prisoners currently have the right to vote—although some of the press reporting would have us believe otherwise—but they are often disfranchised in practice because they cannot register in respect of their home address while they are detained elsewhere.

The clause provides that people on remand may be registered as if they were resident at their previous address or may register in respect of the institution where they are held. The basic principle is that remand prisoners are by definition unconvicted, and although it is right and appropriate that those who are convicted and serving a prison sentence should be deprived of the right to vote as part of their punishment, that should not be the case for those who have not been proved to have committed an offence.

The clause enables people to enjoy rights that they already had but that they were denied because of their detention on remand.

7.45 pm

Mr. Fabricant: I understand the Minister's argument, and the argument advanced by both the Government and the Opposition that convicted criminals should not have the vote, but I wonder what his view is on the recent conclusion of the South African and Canadian Governments that the disenfranchisement of convicted criminals is unconstitutional on human rights grounds. Has he given any consideration to what view the European Court of Human Rights may have, given the statement that was made earlier today regarding the armed forces?

Mr. Howarth: If the hon. Gentleman consults the front of the Bill, he will find that, as with all legislation, there is a declaration by the Secretary of State that its provisions are consistent with the European convention on human rights. In those circumstances, I am sure that he will accept that the matter has been deliberated on and considered appropriately and would not be in the Bill if there were any problems with it. He will forgive me if I do not stray into speculating on what arguments may have taken place in other parts of the world. I am simply not familiar enough with the debates that took place there.

It has suddenly occurred to me that the disenfranchisement of prisoners is consistent with the jurisprudence of the convention. I am sure that that is the answer that the hon. Gentleman would have expected from me. With that assurance, I am sure that he will support the clause, which I commend to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6

NOTIONAL RESIDENCE: DECLARATIONS OF LOCAL CONNECTION

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I beg to move amendment No. 13, in page 8, line 23, at end insert

"and shall be accompanied by at least one item of documentary evidence of the type referred to in subsection (3A) below demonstrating that the declarant is a living person and at least one item of documentary evidence of the type referred to in subsection (3A) below demonstrating that the declarant has resided at the required address, provided that this requirement shall be satisfied by the production of a single item of documentary evidence only, if that item demonstrates both that the declarant is a living person and that he has resided at the required address.

(3A) The items of documentary evidence required for the purposes of subsection (3) shall be any of

(a) a valid United Kingdom passport;

(b) a valid United Kingdom driving licence;

(c) a printed statement from a bank or building society authorised to do business in the United Kingdom and which is dated not more than 28 days before the date of the declaration;

(d) a copy of any of the foregoing certified by a commissioner for oaths;

(e) a letter from an officer of a registered charity active within the parliamentary constituency and which is dated not more than 28 days before the date of the declaration certifying that the declarant is a living person and has resided at the required address;

(f) a letter from the principal officer of a hostel for homeless persons within the parliamentary constituency and which is dated not more than 28 days before the date of the declaration certifying that the declarant is a living person and has resided at the required address,

or such other document as may in the reasonable opinion of the registration officer concerned constitute sufficient evidence of the matters referred to in subsection (3).

(3B) If a person makes a declaration of local connection supported by items of documentary evidence referred to in subsection (3A) and one or more items of that documentary evidence are false, he is guilty of an offence.

(3C) A person guilty of an offence under subsection (3B) is liable, on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding Level 5 on the Standard Scale.

(3D) The declaration of any person convicted of an offence under subsection (3B) of this section shall be rendered void upon his conviction.".

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 113, in page 8, line 23, at end insert

"and shall be accompanied by at least one item of documentary evidence of the type referred to in subsection (3A) below demonstrating that the declarant is a living person and at least one item of documentary evidence of the type referred to in subsection (3A) below demonstrating that the declarant has resided at the required address, provided that this requirement shall be satisfied by the production of a single item of documentary evidence only, if that item demonstrates both that the declarant is a living person and that he has resided at the required address.

(3A) The items of documentary evidence required for the purposes of subsection (3) shall be any of—

(a) a valid United Kingdom passport;

(b) a valid United Kingdom driving licence;

(c) a current passport issued by the Government of a member state of the European Community;

(d) a current book for the payment of allowances, benefits or pensions issued by a United Kingdom Government department;

(e) a medical card issued by the Northern Ireland Central Services Agency or the Great Britain equivalent;

(f) a card made of plastic issued by the Department of Health and Social Security with a name and national insurance number embossed on it;

(g) in the case of a woman married within two years prior to polling day, a certified copy of extract of any entry of marriage issued by the Register General in the United Kingdom;

(h) an United Kingdom identity card bearing a recent photograph of the elector;

(i) a printed statement from a bank or building society authorised to do business in the United Kingdom and which is dated not more than 28 days before the date of declaration;

(j) a copy of any of the foregoing certified by a commissioner for oaths;

(k) a letter from an officer of a registered charity active within the parliamentary constituency and which is dated not more than 28 days before the date of the declaration certifying that the declarant is a living person and has resided at the required address;

(l) a letter from the principal officer of a hostel for homeless persons within the parliamentary constituency and which is dated not more than 28 days before the date of the declaration certifying that the declarant is a living person and has resided at the required address, or such other document as may in the reasonable opinion of the registration officer concerned constitute sufficient evidence of the matters referred to in subsection (3).

(3B) If a person makes a declaration of local connection supported by items of documentary evidence referred to in subsection (3A) and one or more items of that documentary evidence are false, he is guilty of an offence.

(3C) A person guilty of an offence under subsection (3B) is liable, on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding Level 5 on the Standard Scale.

(3D) The declaration of any person convicted of an offence under subsection (3B) of this section shall be rendered void upon his conviction.".

Mr. Evans: I hope that the consensus that we witnessed on clauses 4 and 5 will also be evidenced on clause 6.

One of the more depressing aspects of the Bill is the admission that there is in our society a small group of people who for various reasons are denied what most of us would regard as a basic necessity of life in a civilised society: a roof over their heads. I appreciate the fact that the term "homeless" is divided between rough sleepers and those who are between homes, perhaps in temporary hostel accommodation or living with relatives while awaiting rehousing, but I am concerned with those in the first category.

The Bill brings the situation into the 21st century and admits the fact that we have a group of people in our society who are genuinely homeless. The position varies in different parts of the country. The Minister will know of the problems in his constituency, as I know of those in mine. I have the good fortune to represent a rural constituency, and when I asked one of the local government officers there today what impact she thought the Bill would have when it was enacted, she said that she thought it would have none whatever, because nobody in Ribble Valley was sleeping rough and therefore unable to be on the register.

I spoke to the returning officer in Ceredigion today and he, too, said that there was very little problem there, but we know that in urban areas there are enormous problems. Many of us walk up Victoria street at night on the way home. It is one of the most depressing journeys that we can make. The problem has existed for many years, so I will not try to apportion blame. In the shop doorways there are people sleeping rough, with blankets over them, in a sleeping bag or, even more depressingly, with nothing more than a cardboard box.

Near McDonald's and the Army and Navy store in Victoria street, there are at least 20 individuals sleeping rough—I walk past them every evening on the way back to my flat. Shelter estimates that between 1,500 and 2,000 people sleep rough, but no one can say with certainty how many do so. It is a dreadful shame that those people are denied the opportunity to vote that is given to everyone else. They suffer the indignity of living how they do and they should not suffer the further indignity of not being allowed to participate in the democratic process. Indeed, some people may argue that the homeless should have more of a say in what happens because of the conditions in which they live.

We approach this issue with a determination equal to that of the Government. People should not be excluded from voting, but we wish to ensure that that is achieved as sensibly as possible. Our concerns were raised by Paul Gribble, who was the Conservative nominee on the working group, which said of the definition of locality:

"We recognise that this could be thought to open the system to abuse if a candidate or political party sought to use such declarations to falsely register supporters in the electoral area immediately before an election."

In a letter to the shadow Home Secretary dated 20 September 1999, the Home Secretary said about the possibility of fraud:

"I think that it is important to recognise that the declaration of locality route would be a last resort. The homeless would be encouraged to register wherever possible in respect of an address with which they could establish a link, such as a hostel or day centre which they used regularly."

He added:

"I do not believe that Mr. Gribble's fears are well grounded; but I would of course be happy to discuss this point further to see whether we could modify the proposal in some way so as to meet your party's concerns."

That is what we are trying to do this evening and in that spirit we have tabled amendment No. 13, which is similar to amendment No. 113.

Amendment No. 13 would require some documentary evidence of a person's link to a locality, such as a valid passport or UK driving licence. We appreciate that production of such items may not always be possible so we have also included other items, such as:

"a letter from the principal officer of a hostel for homeless persons within the parliamentary constituency and which is dated not more than 28 days before the date of the declaration certifying that the declarant is a living person and has resided at the required address".

We have made six suggestions and I am sure that the Minister and his officials have considered other forms of documentary proof that would not block people's right to vote but would also ensure that the right is not abused.

We seek to ensure that some proof is given that a person is eligible to be registered in a particular area. The amendment would also make it an offence to make a false declaration, and of course any such declaration would be null and void. It is a reasonable amendment, and I hope that the Government will consider our proposals so that we can extend the franchise without opening up any opportunities for fraud in the registration procedure.

Mr. William Ross: Amendment No. 13 attracted my attention when I read the list of amendments and the House will see that amendment No. 113 is a repeat, except that it adds a few more documents. The documents that I have added to the list are those that are required in Northern Ireland before a ballot paper is issued. I would have thought that that would be a good starting point for considering the need to require some sort of documentary evidence of identity or association with an area.

The Minister will also be aware that the Conservatives have tabled amendments to clause 10. They concern voting taking place on more than one day and would require similar forms of identification. The Conservatives are following through on the issue of identification, which has been necessary in Northern Ireland for many years.

I tabled amendment No. 113 to try to ensure that whatever documentation is needed in London is also needed in Londonderry, Edinburgh, Belfast or wherever. We should have a common means of identification throughout the United Kingdom. I hope that the Government will consider the issue and come up with a common set of documents encompassing those already required in Northern Ireland. Incidentally, the legislation in Northern Ireland talks about full and provisional driving licences, but the term "valid" covers the point.

I have also included in the amendment the possibility of using a United Kingdom identity card bearing a recent photograph of the elector. I am well aware of all the

arguments, because I have listened to them for the past 25 years in this House, about the possible intrusion into the privacy of individuals that identity cards would cause. However, I do not share those concerns. So much information is held on computers in every bank, building society and sales point in the country that no one should be worried about identity cards. Such a document would give great protection against fraud, including electoral fraud, and the Minister will be aware from his experience in Northern Ireland of our concerns on that issue. I do not believe that most people would have a problem with an identity card, and the warnings about invasion of privacy are nonsense and should not be given much weight.

I speak in support of amendment No. 113 in the same spirit as the official Opposition moved amendment No. 13. I wish to ensure that common identification is required throughout the UK and to make a further plea for the Government to reconsider the issue of having a proper identity card that could be used for this and other purposes.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Clause 6 is interesting, as are the amendments, and there are some basic merits to both. I welcome the intention to extend the franchise to people who have been left out, and I agree with the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) that that is a timely amendment of our constitutional arrangements.

I admire the care that the parliamentary draftsmen and Ministers have put into the drafting of the clause, even to the extent of enfranchising homeless peers. I have no idea whether they comprise a growing sector of the community, although recent events may have increased their numbers.

8 pm

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley is right to say that there is a potential problem of personation. We should all be worried about whether personation is encouraged by any provision in the Bill. However, I do not think that the remedy suggested by the hon. Gentleman is right. His proposed list of qualifying documentary evidence would sit poorly with the circumstances faced by many homeless people. Few of them will have a driving licence, or carry with them a UK passport; even fewer will have a bank account or the regular statements that such an account produces. There is a sense of unreality about some of the hon. Gentleman's suggestions.

Some elements of the proposed documentary evidence, such as accreditation from a hostel, appear more relevant to homeless people. However, many homeless people never see the inside of a hostel. In the metropolis such places are oversubscribed, and they do not exist in rural areas, so a person could not gain the necessary accreditation within the qualifying period.

Mr. Evans: I accept much of what the hon. Gentleman says, which is why we have tried to broaden the documentation that might be applicable. Indeed, the amendment refers to

"such other document as may in the reasonable opinion of the registration officer concerned constitute sufficient evidence of the matters referred to in subsection (3)."

Local police officers and charity workers often find people sleeping rough. Under that provision, they would be able to provide a note stating that they know that a person sleeps in a certain place on a regular basis. The effect of the amendment could be quite broad.

Mr. Heath: That intervention helps the discussion, as it is now clear that there is no secret agenda to limit the improvements to the franchise that the clause is trying to introduce.

In addition, I applaud the approach adopted by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), who has also proposed a widening of the documentary evidence that could be deemed acceptable. However, he identified the other difficulty that I have with the amendment. The same level of documentary evidence required to avoid personation should also be required of every elector on the register. There is no obvious reason why people qualified to vote through declarations of local connection should face a more onerous test to prove that they are who they purport to be than any other electors in the United Kingdom. Different tests apply in Northern Ireland, so the same difficulties do not arise there.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Identification is important. The tragedy is that presiding officers consider that a document is not valid if it is even one day past its expiry date. In Northern Ireland, driving licences contain a picture of the person to whom it applies. We must be careful that we do not prevent people from voting by the use of over-precise legal language. Rather than yielding to the arguments of civil libertarians, would it not be better to adopt a common identity document, with a picture, for everyone?

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman has assisted the debate. The difficulty that he has described may apply when we attempt to identify what is appropriate documentary evidence. However, my point is that the same considerations should apply to all voters, regardless of how they are registered.

The situation in this country at present is extraordinary. A person can roll up to a polling station and claim to be someone on the register, but no check is made to confirm that person's identity.

Mr. Grieve: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said, but are we not concentrating too much on how people get registered? One of the problems with personation is that people turn up at polling stations and impersonate others who have been registered previously. The anxiety about those who are of a peripatetic disposition derives not from the fear that they will impersonate other people when they register, but that they will take advantage of other people's absence from an area to impersonate them and take advantage of those people's votes at an election.

Mr. Heath: I understand that concern, but it applies to every registered elector. That is precisely the point that I am making.

The hon. Members for Ribble Valley and for East Londonderry have identified a real problem. I am not convinced that their proposed solutions are the right way to deal with that problem. In fact, I am rather convinced

[Mr. Heath]

that the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley is not the right answer, as it will discourage homeless people from registering.

However, the Government must consider the matter carefully. At the very least, when and if the Bill is enacted, they must review the practical effects of the new arrangements over their first few years in place. If there is any evidence that the opportunities for personation have been extended and that people are abusing the system, the question of appropriate documentation will have to be examined again. That documentation must be sufficient to identify voters when they register and when they vote. I do not think that we have got there yet, but I look forward to the Minister's response.

The Chairman: I call Mr. Michael Fabricant.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Mr. Haselhurst.

The Chairman: Order. If the hon. Gentleman continues to address me in that way, I shall begin to think that he knows something that I do not.

Mr. Fabricant: I argued, Sir Alan, at some length against the proposal of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) to reduce the franchise, so it would be churlish of me to argue against this clause, which would extend it to homeless people. However, the possible difficulties of the provision have already been pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve). The potential for personation and multiple voting is very great, and I welcome what the hon. Member for Somerset and Frome—

Mr. David Heath: Somerton.

Mr. Fabricant: I am not doing very well, Sir Alan, with proper names or constituencies: perhaps I should just sit down. However, I shall not ask hon. Members for a judgment on that, as I suspect that I know what the answer might be.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) is absolutely right to say that the political effects of extending the franchise to the homeless would have to be monitored—there are difficulties in identifying people who turn up to vote and ensuring either that they are not voting in multiple locations or that other people are not voting for them in other parts of the country simultaneously.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): A homeless tramp registered to vote in the constituencies of, for example, St. Helens, South, St. Helens, North and Makerfield would have to rush around on polling day to vote for all the Labour candidates in those areas. On his income, how could he afford to do it? That is a rather farcical example, but is not the reality that the homeless do not register or vote because they are homeless?

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point about the practicality of voting. I shall give him an example of what might happen in practice. Many homeless people have moved to the area of Brighton and Hove in recent years, and many residents of that area feel that their town has been taken advantage of. It is very easy to walk through three constituencies—Hove, Brighton, Pavilion and Brighton, Kemptown—in 15 minutes. It is possible for someone to be able to vote in three constituencies—it does not require money to do so. I emphasise that I am not suggesting that people will do this, but it is possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield gave an example of someone who did not have voting rights who could pick up a slip of paper, walk into a constituency and vote. That would be personation.

We agree with the clause in general, but it will be important to monitor its practical effects.

Mr. Bermingham: I am thinking back over my practical experience, and declaring an interest as a practising lawyer. I can remember only one case of double voting and repeat voting in the past 30-odd years. I have asked many of my colleagues if they can remember any, and they cannot. Repeat voting does not seem to be an English habit.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point, but it surprises me, given that he is a very experienced lawyer. He will be aware of the difference between a crime being detected and a crime being committed. Multiple voting and personation were discussed when we debated this issue last year, and we just do not know how much it happens. I suspect that it is not material; I suspect that Governments have not fallen as a result of such practices. But for heaven's sake, when we introduce legislation, we try to ensure that crimes are not committed.

I welcome an extension of the franchise, but we must be sure that it will not be abused. Just because the hon. Gentleman cannot remember such a crime being committed, it does not mean that it does not happen. It can be argued that the influx into hostels of people who have the franchise has changed local election voting patterns slightly. We cannot be so sure that these practices might not occur. I am simply asking that the legislation is good legislation and that it is regularly reviewed. Will the Minister give an assurance that the practical effects of the legislation be monitored and reported to Parliament from time to time, as is applicable, as the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome requested?

I also welcome the comments of the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) on identity cards. Although it would not be appropriate to discuss the benefits or otherwise of identity cards now, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think that the majority of people in the country would not object to the issue of identity cards. The only objection, perhaps, should be to the compulsory carrying of identity cards at all times. All Members of Parliament have identity cards, but if we carried out a straw poll in the Chamber tonight on how many of us were carrying them, I suspect that the result would not be 100 per cent.

With those reservations, I support not only the amendment but the clause.

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): I oppose the amendment. I understand what Conservative Members have been saying, but their proposals would upset the balance.

Clause 6 is to be welcomed; it is an innovation, and will extend the franchise. However, the amendments would create hurdles that those making a declaration would find difficult to overcome. Homeless people wishing to take advantage of the extension might not have any of the documents listed in the amendment in their possession. If I could be convinced, however, that using either information technology or some other form of identification would be simple and would not prevent those wishing to make a declaration from doing so, I might be more in favour of the amendments. Otherwise, I urge the Committee not to accept them.

8.15 pm

Mr. Grieve: I have a number of brief points to make. First, I welcome the thrust of the Bill. It is very desirable that the franchise should be extended to all those who are entitled to it and that they should be able to avail themselves of it easily. It is clear, therefore, that homeless people are a category that should be addressed.

As was said earlier, there is anxiety about the growth of personation at elections. I spent a lot of time in an inner-city constituency, where that anxiety centred on the tendency to encourage those leading a more transient existence, particularly in hostels, to register and the problem of what happened to the polling cards on polling day when those people had moved to other addresses. Personation can in general be detected only if the person being impersonated turns up to vote. If they do not, there is an opportunity under the existing identification rules for that person to be impersonated and for someone else to exercise, quite wrongfully, their right to vote.

My anxiety about the extension of registration rights is not about the peripatetic tramp. I have every confidence that if he decides to be registered, he will exercise his right to vote properly if he chooses to do so. I am concerned that someone, taking advantage of the fact that such a person is unlikely to exercise his right to vote, will impersonate him.

Mr. Bermingham: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman's experience is the same as mine in that, by and large, year in, year out, at both local and national elections, polling stations are manned by the same polling clerks, who get to know the voters. I know all the clerks in my area, and they get to know the electors. Polling clerks are our best defence against the wandering multiple voter. That is why I said earlier that if anyone had evidence of such a practice, would they please give it to me.

Mr. Grieve: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman about that. In an urban environment, such as the one in which I was a councillor, I do not think that polling station staff are in a position to carry out that kind of detective work.

So how do we address this problem? I accept that this may not be the best place to do it. We need to consider the problem in the round. It might also be unfortunate to do it precisely when we are concentrating on trying to encourage certain categories of people to register and to vote. However, the point requires attention.

I have never been in favour of identity cards, so I accept that there is a catch-22 surrounding my argument in deciding how to deal with this thorny problem.

I cannot say for certain whether the problem is growing.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I support the proposition of the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) against that of the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham). In more than 17 years as a Member of Parliament, I know of various occasions in my constituency when people have turned up to vote to find that someone has voted in their place. I have a 25 per cent. turnover of electors a year, and the electoral staff, who are very competent, do not even begin to think that they can monitor electors, even if they work in the same polling station from one year to the next, which is rare. As the hon. Member for Beaconsfield said, it is a question of finding a way to deal with the problem.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I was drawing to a close, but shall give way once more.

Mr. William Ross: Two points have been raised. First, it is not the role of electoral staff to identify electors. That role has always been taken in Northern Ireland by party representatives who can challenge those who try to personate. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman is dealing with an amateurish personation. It is a very different ball game in West Belfast.

Mr. Grieve: I do not feel qualified to comment on circumstances in Northern Ireland, although I know from anecdotal evidence and otherwise that there appears to have been a particular problem of personation there. That is why separate rules have been devised. I look forward to hearing from the Minister. The amendment has been tabled in good faith to ensure that the issue is discussed. The point will not go away, and I believe that we shall have to reconsider it later.

Mr. George Howarth: I entirely accept that the Opposition's motive in tabling the amendment is honourable and reasonable. They are trying to achieve the laudable objective of preventing electoral fraud. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has pointed out that I chaired the working party that considered the proposals when I was a Home Office Minister. It was one of our rules that every proposal should be treated with care so that no suggestion that we made would compromise the integrity of the ballot in any way. Although there are problems in some parts of the United Kingdom, to which I shall refer later, our electoral system is, if not entirely free of fraud, well respected, and it has a lot of integrity.

Mr. Fabricant: Following on from the remarks of the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham)—no longer in his place—how can the Minister be sure that there is not much fraud? What research does the Home Office do? If fraud had been committed by personation and had not been detected, surely the Home Office would not know of it.

Mr. Howarth: I do not want to be drawn into examples arising from the general election or any other recent election. The Home Office can conduct a review after every general election. If there is any evidence, it is generally, for obvious reasons, political parties that uncover it before passing it on to the Home Office. I do not suggest that the system is wholly free of fraud.

[Mr. Howarth]

There have been cases, and some, I think, are under investigation by the police in certain parts of the country at present. However, a pattern to fraud would tend to be noticed by presiding officers or the political parties. In one or two recent cases, a political party has complained about the activities of another, throwing some light on what has been happening. We cannot be absolutely certain that there is no fraud, and we must be vigilant. We must consider all proposals, but must also examine whether they would compromise the integrity of the ballot.

It is a fundamental principle that everyone has an equal right to vote. Since the adoption of universal suffrage, everyone, irrespective of wealth or status, has been concerned to know that that principle is being upheld. I fear that the amendment might send the wrong message to a section of the community. I know that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) does not want that to happen. If we agree that the right to vote applies to everyone, we must also agree that everyone must have the same right to register. We cannot have one without the other. We must be careful, therefore, before erecting any obstacle that would affect one section of the electorate and not another.

That, inadvertently, is what the amendment would do. Registration would become harder for those who wish to register by means of a local connection than it would be for other electors. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), who tried to take a balanced view, referred to that danger in his short speech. It would be inappropriate to ask homeless people or mental patients to produce bank statements or passports. Meanwhile, a head of a household who registers in the normal way may, when filling in the annual form, add a new name that was not on the form in the previous year. The registration officer would accept that without any requirement for documentary evidence establishing that the new person was alive and resident at the address in question. It would be taken on trust.

Mr. William Ross: Am I mistaken, or is it the case in Great Britain and Northern Ireland that any elector can challenge a name on the electoral register?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman anticipates me. Normally, a head of household fills in a form. There is no reason why the same rule should not apply to those who register by means of a declaration of local connection. Anyone who doubts the validity of a person registered in that way will be able to object to registration, as the hon. Gentleman suggested. One of the Bill's purposes, however, is to make it easier for people to register, particularly those people disadvantaged by existing rules. To impose an additional and difficult burden that other electors would not have to face would run totally counter to that principle.

Mr. Evans: Will the Minister concede that someone who knowingly filled in a registration form incorrectly and falsely would be committing an offence and could be fined?

Mr. Howarth: As I understand it, that is the case.

Mr. Ross: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I was about to deal with the points made by the hon. Gentleman, but I am more than happy to accept his intervention.

Mr. Ross: The measure introduces the principle of rolling registration, thus the time scale before an election might make it impossible for someone to object to a name on the register. Could the Minister deal with that point?

Mr. Howarth: Certainly. The register would be more up to date and people would have a longer time in which to register, so the difficulty described by the hon. Gentleman could arise. However, we have to judge whether inserting an obstacle for certain groups is justified by giving other groups longer in which to object to a particular entry. We should all want to be convinced that the problem was important enough to be catered for in that way before we took that course.

8.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: Like me and other Members, the Minister probably receives a regular update of the electoral register. I receive one every month from my electoral services department. That gives one a means of checking and assimilating information. What is the plan for providing information about the rolling register to parties, councillors and Members of Parliament? Without such a plan, throughout the country, the problem of spotting someone who is registered at two addresses will grow rather than diminish.

Mr. Howarth: I must be honest. The hon. Gentleman and other Members will be aware that I am on a no fee loan to the Home Office for the purposes of the Bill. That came about because I chaired the working party, although no one felt it necessary to explain to me why my presence was required. I am thus not wholly up to date with developments in the Home Office. The point raised by the hon. Gentleman needs to be dealt with and I shall ensure that the appropriate Minister responds to him.

The list of documents in the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for East Londonderry is slightly wider than those listed in amendment No. 13, for reasons that the Committee may understand. However, the amendment would have an impact on homeless people. Furthermore, it would place on such people a burden that would not apply to other voters who would not have to satisfy those conditions. In that sense, it would be unfair to homeless people.

As the hon. Gentleman's set of concerns is more particular to Northern Ireland than it is common in Great Britain, it might be helpful if, in his capacity as a Member of Parliament for a Northern Ireland constituency and in my capacity as a Northern Ireland Office Minister, we were to hold further discussions on the matter. If necessary, I shall make representations to the Home Office subsequently. I hope that he will accept my invitation to hold those discussions.

However, I can provide the hon. Gentleman with some reassurance. Mr. Pat Bradley, who will be known to him and is well respected as the electoral officer for Northern Ireland, was a member of the working party. Mr. Bradley's views were listened to with great attention, and when there were concerns about the situation in Northern Ireland, we listened even more carefully.

We benefited from his experience, which we took very seriously indeed. I shall, of course, listen to the hon. Gentleman's concerns and make any representations that I consider to be necessary.

The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if, in the context of clause 6 and his amendment, I do not enter into a debate on identity cards. Vexed issues arise from that matter, and the Government have taken the view that there are no plans on it at present. I cannot rule that out for ever, but I shall not promote a debate on that vexatious subject this evening. However, I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. His experience in Northern Ireland means that he has special reasons for the position that he takes on the matter.

The hon. Members for Ribble Valley and for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) took a reasonable approach—and I do not exclude the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) from that statement. Indeed, during his contribution, I was pondering the fact that if anyone tried to impersonate him at the ballot box, they would quickly be rumbled. That would certainly not be a problem for him.

However, his hon. Friends the Members for Ribble Valley and for Beaconsfield suggested that their enthusiasm for the amendment was not such that they would necessarily push it to a vote. I believe that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley was looking for an assurance that the issues raised during the debate would be considered further. He is well aware that, on these issues, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary listens very carefully to the views of the House. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department and I will ensure that the issues that have been raised in the debate are drawn to his attention, and I am certain that he will give them proper consideration. On that basis, I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider whether it would be possible to—

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Member for Lichfield seeks to intervene.

Mr. Fabricant: I am glad that the Minister recognised me. Will he give the assurance, asked for by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and re-emphasised by myself, that the Government will regularly review the effectiveness of the clause to ensure that there is no increase in personation or multiple voting?

Mr. Howarth: Yes. I believe that I said earlier that the Home Office regularly reviews elections. It receives representations from political parties and elsewhere, and it will, as a matter of course, keep the effect of the clause and other parts of the Bill under review.

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: I give way for the last time.

Mr. Hughes: I appreciate that the Minister has the Committee's support. Will he add to the list of requests the question—to which there must be an answer—whether there is any spot-check process? If people knew that the form, as submitted, might be subject to a check, the form might be submitted more honestly. Spot checks are carried out in the case of almost everything else in life, and would not be inappropriate in this case.

Mr. Howarth: As the hon. Gentleman knows, returning officers have a wide discretion. I am sure that, where there are grounds for suspicion, they will devise whatever checks are necessary. I am sure that any emerging pattern would be checked. However, obviously, the matter needs, and will continue to receive, attention.

I hope that, on the basis of the assurances that have been given, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley will feel it appropriate to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Evans: The debate has been useful.

I have said how depressing it is to walk along Victoria street at night and see the rough sleepers, especially given the weather this winter. We talk about the flu epidemic. It must be acutely depressing to sleep in a shop doorway in London in the present conditions—a dreadful existence.

I heard what the Prime Minister said before Christmas about continuing the excellent work that was started under the Conservative Government with the rough sleepers initiative; I support that wholly and fully. I am not saying that, even if we could double the amount of money spent, no one would sleep rough, but I believe that we must do more to help those who are sleeping rough. If that entails a multi-agency approach—as I believe that it does—that would be welcomed by every Member of the House.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend did not want to make a party political point. I disagree with him. Is he aware that Shelter says not only that 2,000 people are sleeping rough in central London, but that, sadly, that figure is now increasing?

Mr. Evans: I shall not make a party political point because I want to emphasise what we are trying to do to help rough sleepers. I am not saying that, even if the amount spent were doubled, there would not still be a problem, especially in London.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) spoke to amendment No. 113. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) and my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) also spoke.

The hon. Member for Upminster said that he needed to be convinced that we were not placing unnecessary obstacles in the way of homeless people who wanted to register to vote. I hope that the addition of the two lines below paragraph (f) of amendment No. 13, which allow other documentation to be accepted as sufficient evidence, will give him and the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome confidence that we are not seeking to set up obstacles that would obstruct people from registering. That is not what the Bill or the amendment are about. We are trying to prevent personation and fraud.

We accept that personation goes on at election times even though we do not know the extent to which it occurs. If we give people the opportunity to register more than once, those that personate may try to do so. We want to close a loophole before it comes into being. We want to

[Mr. Evans]

make it easier for people to vote, but we do not want to make it easier for them to register fraudulently so that they can vote more than once.

Even if this provision allows 1,500 to 2,000 people to register, I do not know what percentage of them would use their ability to make a declaration of locality. It is not sufficient just to have that option available. We must ensure that people are able to use it. That means that social services, the Churches, which do a lot of good work, those who run soup kitchens and others who talk on a nightly basis with the homeless could become involved in the education process to encourage people to register and to tell them where to vote. Shelter and several other charities could also be used. Legislating so that the homeless are able to vote does not necessarily mean that one extra person will turn up at a local authority to register. People must encourage and educate them about what we are doing.

The charities, the police and the vicars and priests who regularly talk to homeless people would be able to provide the documentary evidence that someone sleeps in a part of London, be that outside McDonald's or round the back of the Army and Navy. For the first time, the Bill will allow people to use such places as an address if it is the only address that they have.

I hope that the amendment will reassure the Minister that we are not introducing any obstacles into the Bill. He talked about the integrity of the ballot box being important and that is right. The dignity of the homeless in being able to vote is also important. What we are trying to do would enable us to bring both aims together and to enfranchise those people who are currently unable to vote. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 15, in page 8, line 38, at end insert—

"provided that, in determining this, no account shall be taken of time which he spends in any place in the course of employment or of the provision of services for pecuniary reward".

The amendment would ensure that where an elector is registered is based on where that person lives as opposed to where that person works. I do not believe that the Government intend the Bill to allow people to try to register where they work instead of where they live, but that point is not made clear. The amendment would clarify any confusion.

We tabled the amendment because some people work in different parts of the country at different times of the year. For example, transient and holiday workers regularly go fruit picking or hop picking for a short period of the year, but that could be just before a general election takes place. The Minister must say whether it is the Bill's intention that those who go fruit picking in different parts of the country could use the Bill so that they do not need to provide the address at which they live, but the address at which they stay for two or three months. The amendment would stop that happening.

There are many seasonal workers in the north-west, which is where my constituency is. Many people work seasonally in the tourist industry in Ribble Valley. Blackpool is not too far away. The Minister will have visited it for the Labour party conference. Speaking as a north-west Member of Parliament, I hope that it will not be too long before the Labour party returns to Blackpool. He will know from visiting Blackpool and other resorts that many people work seasonally in what passes for summer in our country, so they work in a resort for only a short period.

8.45 pm

Mr. Bermingham: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that he, like me, falls into that trap? No doubt he has a home in his constituency; he may have a home in another part of the country, and he will have a home in London. Which one should he register at and vote from? Does he register for local government purposes in all three places, as one can, and vote occasionally or by postal vote, and choose one place to vote in general elections? That needs to be clarified.

Mr. Evans: Obviously, Members of Parliament come into that category. Students do too, because their parents may include them on the registration form at home, while the students may register themselves at university. Someone in a hall of residence may register all the students there.

To give another example, when I was a student I lived in Swansea but I came to London for short periods to work for Manpower, an agency. I could have considered that the constituency in London was more marginal and decided to register there.

My point is that the Bill will make it easier to register to vote. In the main, Members of Parliament have a home here and in their constituency, but seasonal workers may well live in a hostel or hotel accommodation. I simply lived with my brother in London when I worked here. Surely it is not the Bill's intention that people working in London for a few days a week over a short period should be able to register at home and in London. The Bill will make that easier. Is that what the Minister wants? I want him to clarify the position.

We have to recognise that we have a changing work force who are far more mobile. People can work all over the country for short periods. They seek work wherever they can find it. I hope that the Minister will consider our amendment carefully. There is nothing malicious in it. We are sincere about it, but we hope that he can assure us that there is no intention that people should be able to pick and choose where they vote and take advantage of the opportunity to register in a marginal constituency rather than where they live most of the time.

Mr. Bermingham: I shall be brief because my voice is not at its best tonight. I rather liked amendment No. 14, which was tabled by the Opposition, and I am sad that it was not called because it would have tidied up an anomaly in the current voting system.

I have a flat in London and I can register to vote there, and I have a home in Birmingham and I can register there, but the returning officer in London would not know that I was registered in Birmingham. I can register in my constituency. Where do I vote in an election? Do I vote for myself in my constituency or do I use my postal vote in—

The Chairman: Order. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for interrupting him, but for his clarification

and that of other hon. Members, I point out that amendment No. 14 was selected and debated in a group headed by amendment No. 30 on 15 December.

Mr. Bermingham: I accept that. I was aware that the amendment had been debated, but I rather liked it. As always I hope that I pick my words with great care and accuracy. If my memory serves me correctly, the amendment was not put to the vote on 15 December.

Now that I finally have the Minister's ear, I emphasise that were he, in thinking of the overall breadth of the Bill, to think back to 15 December—I am grateful to you, Sir Alan, for aiding me in reminding him—he would see the wisdom of amendment No. 14 when coupled with amendment No. 15. Effectively, they would require people to state on their annual return at the beginning of October where else they had registered. Returning officers would then know whether people had more than one eligible address, and at an election it would be simple to check—to return to the previous debate—whether there had been multiple voting.

It is a simple little matter. Even if amendment No. 15 is not pressed to a vote, I hope that the Minister will take on board its spirit because it tidies up a loophole—provided that it is coupled with amendment No. 14, which was debated on 15 December. I am grateful for your assistance, Sir Alan, which I hope has helped the force of my case. Sometimes one gets an opportunity to tidy up a little, if one marries two things together. It is useful democracy, is it not?

Mr. Fabricant: I rise briefly to support amendment No.15—not to talk about the role of Members of Parliament and where they may or may not live, but to say that, as the amendment is particularly concerned that there should be no determination of the amount of time that someone might spend

"in any place in the course of employment or of the provision of services for pecuniary rewards",

it has a special relevance to the internet age in which we live.

More and more people find that they can work from several different locations—not only in their offices but from their homes, in hotel rooms or abroad—while maintaining direct contact with their companies by placing and fulfilling orders and completing reports through the internet. The amendment is particularly useful, recognising the changes in work patterns. The Government would be ill advised to ignore it.

We have already had some debate on whether one ought to be at a place of residence on the evening of 10 October to determine one's entitlement to vote. The amendment would ensure that people not resident at that time, but working elsewhere, wherever that might be, were still able to vote in a particular area.

The Government should take heed of the amendment; they would be unwise to ignore it. If they did so, they would be the party not of the 21st century but of the 20th century—although, as the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) said much earlier, we are technically still in the 20th century. On that confusing note, I rest my case.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I, too, was confused—but about whether the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was about to introduce his views into the debate. As it appears he is not, and since he has not been listening for the past few minutes, perhaps we may proceed.

I believe that all hon. Members agree that homeless people have the same basic rights as us to register as electors and to vote. The fact that they are homeless does not mean that they should be excluded from the democratic process. The only point at issue is how we can make it as easy and proper as possible for homeless people to register, bearing in mind their particular circumstances, while, at the same time, doing nothing to make it easier to register fraudulently.

The solution that we have come up with is the declaration of local connection. The new section 7B of the Representation of the People Act 1983 will allow a homeless person to register in respect of a relevant address. That address will be a place where he commonly spends a substantial part of his time. We think that that is the right approach. A homeless person will be required to indicate where he spends much of his time, which is likely to be the place with which he has the closest connection. It may, for example, be a hostel or even a shop doorway where he sleeps. It may equally be the place where he spends the bulk of his waking hours. That could be a day centre for the homeless, but it could be a place where he is employed or where he routinely has a patch where he sells *The Big Issue*, for example. If such a place is the place with which the person concerned feels that he has the closest connection, we should not prevent it from being used for registration purposes, which is the purpose behind the amendment.

We are not talking about a place where a person goes to pick fruit or hops, or for his holidays. He or she needs to spend a substantial amount of time in the place. Seasonal workers are not generally considered to be homeless and they must register at their residence. The amendment applies only to the homeless.

I remind the Committee of the rules governing qualification for election as a local councillor. To be elected to a local authority, a person must live in or own property in the authority area, or must work there. The principle that one can establish a link with an area through employment is already well established and there is no reason why it should not apply to the homeless.

Mr. Fabricant: If someone is working for a company but is rarely based at the company—let us say that he is working for the company by using an internet link, which is frequently the case—would that qualify that person to stand for election to the local council in that area or, in the instance of the Bill, would it qualify him to have voting rights in that area?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman asks me to interpret as a court or a returning officer the words that appear in the Bill. That interpretation is best left to a returning officer or to the court rather than to a Minister. Let me ensure that I duck the question obviously and definitely.

Electoral registration has been largely based on residence. In many ways, that is the best principle. It cannot apply in exactly the same form to the homeless, but by allowing them to register in respect of the place with which they have a close connection we are making the minimum necessary modification to the underlying

[Mr. O'Brien]

principle. If that place happens to be one where the homeless person is employed or provides a service for reward, so be it. We should not force homeless persons to register in respect of some other place with which they have a less well-defined connection, or where they spend less of their time.

My hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) made some important points about multiple registration. To some extent, his comments have been dealt with in previous debates. However, I listened with great interest to his arguments and I shall continue to bear them in mind as we progress with the Bill.

I hope that in the light of my response the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) will be able to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for the contributions of the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman can at least support the thrust of the amendment.

I am somewhat disappointed by the Minister's response. I know that we are talking about the homeless, and he may feel that there will be no abuse. We wanted him to say that the Bill was never intended to be used in a way that would lead to abuse. Our purpose was to close any loopholes that might possibly open up.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman can accept that the Bill was never intended to be used in a way that would lead to abuse. In the nature of things, we would not intend that to be the case.

9 pm

Mr. Evans: I am sure that that was never the intention, but if we can improve the Bill—which is what Committee stages are all about—we should take every opportunity to do so, and that is what our amendment seeks. I hope that the Minister will reconsider the amendment when he reflects on the debate, particularly the contribution from the hon. Member for St. Helens, South. We should make it as easy as possible for the homeless to register to vote while ensuring that the system is not open to abuse. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. William Ross: I beg to move amendment No. 102, in page 8, line 43, at end insert—

"and the declarant's previous address".

This part of the clause deals with the situation in Northern Ireland, and it is for that reason that I have tabled this short amendment. I tabled another amendment which seems not to have been selected, but perhaps, like the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham), I have been caught flat-footed; it may have been discussed before the House rose for the Christmas recess.

This is a probing amendment to find out what efforts the Government are making to prevent fraud. Northern Ireland has a land frontier, and there is the danger of people floating across the frontier for electoral purposes into constituencies and local government areas where a dozen, 50 or 100 votes could make an enormous difference, such as changing a council's political complexion or making or breaking a Member of Parliament. Reference was made to that in the debates on the first group of amendments discussed earlier.

If the declarant has been in Northern Ireland for the previous three months, he probably has an address somewhere. If he has not had an address in the previous three months, he must have had an address just prior to that either in Northern Ireland, elsewhere in the United Kingdom or in the Irish Republic. I am trying to establish some method by which we can identify the individual, where he came from and whether he is genuine or part of a concerted effort deliberately to defraud or undermine the electoral system.

The Minister has made it perfectly clear that he is determined that electoral fraud shall not happen. I share that aim. My constituents and my colleagues in Northern Ireland have good reasons for sharing it. The present position in Northern Ireland is that a person must have lived in an electoral or council area or in a constituency for three months before 15 September, which is the qualifying date to prove that the individual has a genuine interest in the area, rather than October as in Great Britain.

We are now changing that and moving to a system of rolling registration. That has considerable implications in the Province which do not prevail elsewhere. I know that the Minister would not want to open the door to the possibility of widespread and carefully conceived electoral fraud, turning electoral takeover of certain areas from an illegal into a legal activity. The changes made in the Bill certainly make electoral fraud easy.

I have a fundamental problem with the Bill. It opens a barn door to fraud under certain circumstances. It makes it easy for people to allege that they are moving from one constituency to another. The Minister should consider this item carefully. I can see reasons why the words in the amendment should not be added to this subsection—make no mistake about that—but there are also good reasons for doing so. The amendment would provide a method of tracing an individual and determining whether he is engaged in fraud or is genuine and has a right to be on the electoral register. I am trying to close that loophole before it is too wide open. I should like the Minister to tell me why these words should not be added to the Bill and what the Government's objections to them are.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The position in Northern Ireland is, in many respects, similar to that in the rest of the United Kingdom, but in other respects it is different. The situation in Northern Ireland has been difficult for some decades, and in the past it has been alleged that problems have arisen in its electoral system that have been less evident elsewhere in the UK.

I do not think that the amendment is necessary. It would make those wishing to register as electors in Northern Ireland sign a declaration of local connection, a requirement that would not apply to those seeking to register in other parts of the United Kingdom. If we are to impose extra requirements, we need substantial evidence that a problem is likely to arise.

I do not deny that, given the history of Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) may have valid reasons for expressing his concerns, but, as he said, a special requirement already

applies in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland—but not in other parts of the United Kingdom—a person cannot be registered unless he has resided in the Province for the previous three months. The proposed new section 4(2) of the Representation of the People Act 1983—which clause 1(2) of this Bill will insert—replicates that requirement by providing that no one may register in Northern Ireland unless he has been resident there for the entire period of three months before the date of registration on the rolling register. Clause 6(4)(b) makes equivalent provision for homeless persons seeking to register in respect of a declaration of local connection.

I see no reason to impose any additional requirements at this stage. I certainly do not see why people in Northern Ireland who register by means of declarations of local connection should be required to provide information over and above that provided by other electors. Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman, however. The Government do not want the system to be opened up to widespread fraud. They are aware that there may well be concerns in Northern Ireland, and are anxious not to seem unduly complacent. After every election—including general elections—the way in which the election was conducted will be monitored, and the electoral rules will be reviewed to ensure that they are not being abused.

We will certainly listen to the views of the hon. Gentleman and his party—and others in Northern Ireland—if, once the Bill has been enacted, evidence is submitted that an abuse has occurred. We shall then be prepared to consider ways of dealing with the problem.

I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman may have some concerns, given the history of Northern Ireland. We do not think that the arrangements there need to be exactly the same as those in other parts of the United Kingdom, but we do not want to impose unnecessary burdens on those seeking to vote in Northern Ireland. It is a question of getting the balance right. I think that we have got the balance right in the Bill and that we do not need the amendment. However, if evidence were subsequently produced suggesting that problems were starting to occur, we would examine it and consider how to deal with the problems.

I hope that, following my reassurance, the hon. Gentleman will feel able to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Ross: I am willing to withdraw the amendment, but I still have a sneaking concern. If there is fraud and some people lose their seats at an election, it will not be much comfort to them to say that we will correct the problem before the next election, especially if the complexion of the council has changed. I hope that the Minister will bear that in mind. We have deep concerns—and there are real reasons for them because we have a land frontier.

As the Minister knows, I have often, or at least on a number of occasions, taken part in the post mortem in the Home Office after elections. The reality is that it is almost impossible to catch people who practise deceit in electoral matters, or are involved in personation, and prove it.

Mr. O'Brien: Let me perhaps give the hon. Gentleman a little more reassurance. We need not necessarily wait for an election. If it became clear—remember, the provision is to do with homeless persons—that suddenly a large number of people were claiming to be homeless, to have a local connection, and to have been there for three months, and many of those so-called homeless people were not known in the area, the returning officer would undoubtedly become suspicious in an area such as Northern Ireland because homeless people tend to become known. Therefore, the returning officer could at that point alert the authorities of that potential problem before the election took place.

Mr. Ross: I am grateful for that explanation. One of the ways in which the returning officers, or electoral officers as we call them in Northern Ireland, could increase their knowledge would be by asking the Housing Executive how many homeless people were applying for homes. People will start to look for a house if they are genuinely homeless. If they are not genuine, they will not be looking for such dwellings. Bearing that in mind—I hope that the Minister will bear it in mind—I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 16, in page 9, line 14, at end insert—

"(7A) If a person knowingly makes a declaration of local connection at a time when there is in existence another declaration of local connection which he has made and which has not been cancelled or rendered void, he is guilty of an offence.

(7B) A person guilty of an offence under subsection (7A) of this section is liable, on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding Level 5 on the Standard Scale".

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 56, 57, 62 and 63.

Mr. Evans: As we can see from some of the Government amendments, the Government have come a long way in recognising some of the problems that we have detected in the Bill. It is only fair to say that we welcome that. We have gone a little further in making it an offence to register local connection in more than one place.

We are of the view that as many homeless people as possible should be encouraged to take the opportunity to register to vote. For some of them, it may be the first time that they have ever registered to vote. Just because they do not have the dignity of a roof over their heads does not mean that they should not be allowed to put a vote to their voice. Therefore, we welcome the thrust of the measure.

We have heard about some close constituency results and overseas electors. Some seats were decided by a small group of people; the majority was small. The 1992 Vale of Glamorgan election has been mentioned—I think that the majority was 19, a small number. As we know, some elections have been decided by even less, such as the Winchester election, which was decided by two votes. There have been other elections where the majority was in single figures.

Therefore, personation in relation to local connection could be a real problem. It could decide elections. We have to accept that that is true. We are trying—I hope that the Government accept that it is exactly what we are trying to do—to encourage homeless people to register

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to vote, but, at the same time, ensure that we do not activate people who are not homeless, but who might use the flexibility in the Bill to start to register and to make more than one local connection. That is the last thing that we want to happen.

9.15 pm

We know that constituencies differ—my constituency, for example, is large. As we heard from the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham), in some areas it is enormously difficult for some people to register and vote. Accordingly, provisions in the Bill will make it easier for people to vote by post. I have enormous reservations, however, about the potential for fraud that we shall be building into the system, and believe that an offence of local declaration might prove to be useful.

The potential for fraud will be bad enough in general elections, but it might also be a problem in by-elections—with which I shall deal specifically when I speak to a subsequent clause. In general elections, there could be an enormous impact if local connections are declared in more than one area. Although I concede entirely that the number of homeless people who would try to abuse the system that we are establishing is small, those who might be considered as part of the Swampy factor—those who usually protest in other ways—might abuse both the system and the flexibility for homeless people that we are including in the Bill.

I believe that, in some constituencies, the ability to make a local declaration will cause problems with those who are not homeless, but who may register under the novel provisions of clause 6. Moreover, as things stand, it would not be an offence for them to make such a declaration. I therefore ask the Minister to ensure that we plug the legislative loophole to ensure that those who make local declarations are allowed to do so only once and that we do not open the floodgates to a protest movement of those who will suddenly be able to make local declarations.

Currently, electoral registers across the country are not correlated. In 10 years, the situation may change and local registration officers may be able to check with one another. Today, I spoke to my electoral registration officer and asked her what would happen if I not only remained registered at the house that I left last year, but also registered in my new village. She said that their computer software would show my name appearing twice, and that they would investigate the double registration and remove one of the entries.

The duplication of my name would have occurred in a single constituency. I think that it is very unlikely that anyone would make more than one local declaration in the same constituency, as electoral officers would get wise to such attempts and identify possible problems. If such attempts—or even concerted campaigns—were made over a much wider area, however, I am not sure that they would be detected. We should therefore include in the Bill a provision to ensure that if such declarations are made and detected—detection is a separate issue—they will constitute an offence, possibly a criminal offence, for which people are liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.

We should like the Minister carefully to consider amendment No. 16. We realise that the Government's amendments in this group go some way in tightening the legislation, but we ask him to go one stage further.

Mr. Linton: I shall not detain the Committee for more than a couple of minutes, but I cannot let this moment pass without pointing out the official Opposition's inconsistency. Before Christmas, Opposition Front Benchers very strenuously opposed amendments to stop dual registration that were tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and me. The hon. Gentleman is now opposing dual registration for homeless people, after defending dual registration for rich people who are registered both at a country house and a town house. He raises the principle of dual registration in a way that applies not only to the homeless, but to everybody. The other categories who enjoy it are people with second homes, Members of Parliament and students. That gives many Members personal experience of—if not interest in—the subject.

The amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield and myself were almost exactly the same as those being moved now by the hon. Gentleman, if one substituted the word "declaration" of local interest for "registration".

Mr. Evans: We have asked for some form of identification to be made for local declarations, but that has not been accepted fully. It will be easier to register than ever before. When a campaign starts, it will be so much harder to detect where this is happening and close it down. It will still be an offence to vote in a general election in more than one constituency but, in respect of registration and a campaign by a group—I am not picking on the homeless, who I do not think will do this—people may abuse the system.

Mr. Linton: The point is that we want a registration system that is unlikely to be abused. The hon. Gentleman referred to moving within his constituency, but problems arise because there is no correlation between moving from one place and moving to another. We have advocated a system where there was no dual registration, and that would not stop Members of Parliament or students having a choice about where they voted. They could say that they were resident in one constituency or the other. However, it would stop them being registered in both places at the same time. That has the enormous benefit that when one moves one's registration for parliamentary purposes—this would not apply to local election registration—one moves away from one constituency to another. One transfers the registration, rather than simply starting a new one while probably forgetting to cancel the old one.

That is the enormous advantage of an end to dual registration. It would not be against the interests of those who reside in two places, who would always have a choice. It would ensure that the electoral registration process is one of registering in one place and transferring to another. That means that many of the 4 million people who are on the register but should not be, and the 7 million who should be but are not, would be eliminated by a basic reform to the system to prevent dual registration for parliamentary elections—not only for the homeless, but for everybody.

Mr. William Ross: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we are serious about stopping dual registration,

every elector in the country should have a unique number attached to his name, whether it is his national insurance number or, even better, his medical card number, which the computers could then throw up if someone registered in more than one place?

Mr. Linton: I hope to come to that point in the debate on the next amendment.

Mr. David Heath: Clearly, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) is expressing a point of interest to the Committee. I have some sympathy with his point, as I have with the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), with whom I agree about single rather than dual registration. As far as possible, I believe that the same rules should apply to every class of elector, rather than having distinctive arrangements.

I do not believe that the amendment would cover what is needed, nor do I think that the Government have yet got it right. The criticism in both cases may be to do with the mechanism. The current proposition is that there should be a duty on the person registering to cancel any previous registration. We do not know exactly what cancellation means, and the duty could be very light or very onerous; we must discover that from the Minister.

The Minister clearly recognises that the wording was not right before, by virtue of the Government amendments, and especially No. 57, which would ensure that the same requirement applied to a declaration of local connection as to a normal registration.

Mr. Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it will be difficult enough to get homeless people to register in the first place, let alone getting them to de-register when they move? That is why we must make absolutely certain that when they re-register they are asked specifically to declare whether they have registered anywhere else, so that their name can be removed from the other location.

Mr. Heath: That underlines my concerns about the arrangements proposed in the amendment. It seems to be an onerous duty that will be difficult for people to fulfil. One of the problems is the synchronicity: if the amendment were made, cancellation of the previous registration would have to occur before the declaration of local connection was made. That double process cannot be what the hon. Gentleman intended and I hope that it would not be implemented in that way.

Surely a cancellation is not what we need. The Government amendments make it clear that a previous registration by declaration of local connection falls when the person is re-registered in any way. We need a system that places a duty on the person not to cancel with the previous registration officer but simply to make the new registration officer aware that he or she was previously registered. The officer would then have the responsibility of ensuring that the other officer is made aware of the change. If we have that mechanism, we do not need to get too excited about the problem.

The hon. Gentleman has detected the fact that there is no clear duty or sanction to ensure that the applicant makes a previous registration known when re-registering, but the amendment does not quite answer the case.

Mr. Evans: The Minister referred to the problem in a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) of 16 December. He said:

> "In addition, the form for registering in this way will also need to include details of any current registrations so that, again, the registration officer can ensure that the person is deleted from the register in respect of a previous address."

Mr. Heath: That is very helpful. If we have a form designed in that way and there is a penalty for knowingly giving false information, the matter is dealt with. If the Minister can assure me that that is the case, even though it is not in the Bill, there is no longer a problem of dual registration and the amendment is unnecessary.

9.30 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) is right. He quoted the letter that I sent and I hope that that provides him with sufficient reassurance. I can confirm that what I said in the letter was right, which it is always a pleasure to do.

As the Bill is currently drafted it does nothing to prevent a person from registering more than once as an elector using declarations of local connection. Because declarations of local connection are designed for use by those such as the homeless, mental patients and remand prisoners who are unable to establish residence in the normal way, that seems wrong and amendments Nos. 56 and 57 will prevent that.

I note the comments of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley earlier, but overall, Members of Parliament receive an excellent service from the officers of the House and we have too little opportunity to pay tribute to them. Perhaps I should mention that the loophole that we seek to close was originally spotted by the eagle-eyed Oonagh Gay of the Library when she was preparing her excellent research paper on the Bill. I am sure that all hon. Members are grateful to her for referring to the matter in her research paper so that we could deal with it.

Amendments Nos. 62 and 63 will make a similar change in respect of those who register by means of a service declaration. Those who register in the normal way and legitimately have more than one residence—I know that that includes many hon. Members—will not be prevented from registering in respect of each of them. I shall not revisit the debate that we had about dual registration, but I hope that, in the light of that reassurance and the indications I have given about how we intend to deal with the issue, the hon. Gentleman will feel able to withdraw his amendment. I invite the Committee to support amendments Nos. 56, 57, 62 and 63.

I do not go all the way with the hon. Gentleman on what he calls the Swampy factor, although it is something that we will wish to consider. I will discuss it with my officials and consider whether we will be able to deal with it in the other place if that turns out to be necessary. I am not convinced that it is as big a problem as the hon. Gentleman fears, but I will consider his constructive comments.

Mr. Evans: We have had another useful debate and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) for his contribution to it. I accept much of what he said about double registration. We have made a start in closing loopholes and, if clear abuses are taking place, we will

[Mr. Evans]

need to reconsider. I understand that students form the bulk of those who register twice—there are only 659 Members of Parliament—but it is an offence to vote more than once in a general election. I also understand that some people wish to vote in local elections that take place at different times in different areas. We may need to revisit the issue in five years' time, given the pace at which new technology is advancing.

I am grateful to the Minister for his comments. The Government's amendments will do much to close the loophole. I am also grateful that he has undertaken to reconsider what I have called the Swampy factor—the fact that a politically motivated group of people may use the legislation to enfranchise people who currently cannot vote. It would be wrong for such people to be able to abuse the system for their own ends. If Home Office Ministers and officials study that matter and detect a problem, I hope that they will act, in another place, to close that loophole.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 17, in page 9, line 20, at end insert—

"(10) A declaration of local connection shall be of no effect if that declaration states an address which is an address within a constituency which is not represented by a Member of Parliament at the time when that declaration is received by the registration officer".

The amendment would offer further protection for the democratic process by ensuring that travelling voters could not target particular seats. I speak as one who bears the battle scars of two by-elections—in Pontypridd, where I came third, and in the safe Conservative seat of Ribble Valley, where I came second. The amendment would prevent groups of politically motivated people—who clearly would not belong to either the Conservative or the Labour parties—from inflicting the Swampy factor on elections.

Some protesters are prepared to stay underground or at the top of trees to make their point. It is naive to think that people motivated enough to do such things would not be motivated enough to travel around the country and make a local declaration in an area where a by-election was to be held.

I am rather disappointed that there are no representatives from Plaid Cymru in the Chamber tonight, as one of that party's seats has recently been vacated by the resignation of the hon. Member for Ceredigion. This important Bill tries to address the observed decline in voting by encouraging as many people as possible to vote. However, the Ceredigion by-election has been called for 3 February. It is doubly disappointing that about 3,800 young people—first-time voters, in the main—will not be able to vote on that date because they are registered on the new register that comes into force on 16 February.

The Ceredigion by-election will not be affected by the Bill, but other by-elections will be. When a seat is vacated because the Member of Parliament dies, several weeks normally pass before a by-election is held. That was what happened after the tragic death of Alan Clark, but, clearly, Plaid Cymru had its own reasons for acting quickly in the case of Ceredigion.

The gap of several weeks that normally occurs gives ample opportunity for the Swampy factor to come into play. People can move around the country and make local declarations in the constituency involved. That may not be very important in constituencies where one party enjoys a large majority, but we must ensure that the Bill closes down any abuses that might exist, and that it opens no fresh possibilities for abuse. Where a majority runs into only three or four figures, politically motivated people could travel around the country to where by-elections are to be called and could actually decide the results.

We are trying to be realistic about abuses of the system. Because there will be a rolling register and because we are bending over backwards to enable people to register to vote as quickly as possible—more quickly than ever before—no one can say that we are closing the stable door to prevent genuine and legitimate voters from voting. However, the amendment would ensure that, once a seat was vacated, normally because of the death of a Member of Parliament, people could not turn up, make declarations of their location and try to abuse the system.

I hope that the Minister can assure all hon. Members that the Government are taking the situation seriously and that, if they are not prepared to accept our amendment, they will introduce one to close that loophole.

Mr. Simon Hughes: There is a danger that this might become a discussion between by-election groupies or people who have been through the by-election process. All I can say to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) is that some of us have a better score than he has.

Mr. Evans: Everybody has.

Mr. Hughes: I was trying to be gentle, but as the hon. Gentleman has owned up so generously, I thank him very much.

We are sympathetic to the amendment. It is important not to allow a sudden influx of people into an area once a by-election has been called. The electorate should be fixed on the day that the by-election is called. We share the concern and disappointment expressed about the by-election in Ceredigion. It has an intelligent electorate and there is often a very high turn-out. Because of the politics in the area, contests are close, and the seat has changed parties often since the last war. Yet the next generation of people who want to vote will be deprived of the chance to do so. As someone with family in Ceredigion, who are on the electoral register and will—I assume and hope—be voting, I share that concern. Plaid Cymru has let those people down and let down the case for wider electoral reform.

I hope that the Minister will be sympathetic to the proposal. Our electoral systems must not allow elections to be rigged by people suddenly moving in and signing on. The amendment is one way of ensuring that. The wording may not be perfect, but I hope that some comfort will be given to the proposition, and that we can deal with the problem before the Bill ends its passage through Parliament.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The amendment presents some interesting questions and some difficulties. I would be reluctant to create a situation in which homeless people

were treated differently from those who could use the rolling registration scheme. The rolling register will enable people to register to vote when a vacancy occurs if they are not homeless—if they are registering other than by means of a local connection.

The amendment would stop those who register by means of a declaration of local connection from doing so where a vacancy has arisen. They would therefore be treated differently from those who could otherwise register under the rolling registration scheme. I am reluctant to do that. However, I listened with care to the points made by the hon. Members for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). The reference to the Swampy factor can be overdone; I would not want to raise a spectre to haunt the whole idea. That would not be realistic. As the hon. Member for Ribble Valley said, getting homeless people to register will be difficult in any event. At the same time, we want to ensure that we provide every encouragement and do not seek to disfranchise people by reason of their homelessness.

9.45 pm

We need to ensure that proper systems are in place to deal with those who seek to register for improper reasons. However, we must strike a balance to ensure that there is a level playing field. I have heard what has been said and shall discuss the issue with officials to see whether there may be some way to deal with it. The amendment is not the way to do that. It would create discrimination against people who were homeless and who sought to register by way of a declaration of local connection. I do not like that proposal, but I do not deny that there is an outside possibility that people may seek to register for a by-election. I shall consider the matter with more care and write to the hon. Members for Ribble Valley and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, and will happily copy the correspondence to any other hon. Member who indicates an interest to me when the debate is over.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for what the Minister has said and for the support of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. It is sad, as he said, that people who should vote for the first time in the Ceredigion by-election will be denied their opportunity for up to two years. They will remember well who denied them their vote in 2000.

I am grateful for the Minister's assurances. The Opposition do not want to set up some demarcation that picks on the homeless and no one else. However, when the Minister reconsiders the point, will he look into the possible problems with by-elections, particularly those that take place several weeks after a vacancy occurs? There is an opportunity for abuse of the system, but it could easily be prevented. Matters are different when people move house. People are not likely to go so far as to spend perhaps £60,000, £70,000 or £80,000 to try to abuse the system and get a vote, but a local declaration costs nothing. It would be far easier for people to abuse the system in that way than it would in any other. I am reassured by what the Minister said, and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendments made: No. 56, in page 9, line 38, leave out first "any" and insert "another".

No. 57, in page 9, line 39, leave out "otherwise than" and insert ", whether or not".—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Question proposed, That the clause, as amended, stand part of the Bill.

Mr. David Heath: I do not want to detain the Committee for long. As the Minister gave his assurances on amendment No. 17, he said that the form of declaration would include a requirement that a person should declare whether he or she were already registered by virtue of a declaration of local connection elsewhere. Does he intend to table an amendment to clause 6 in order to amend section 7B(3) of the 1983 Act, where the contents of a declaration of local connection are specified? If a further mandatory requirement for information is to be placed on any person seeking to register, it seems extraordinary that it should not appear in legislation, and it would be more convenient if it did.

Mr. O'Brien: We do not need to include that in the Bill—it would simply be a matter of the returning officer having prescribed forms, which would, no doubt, be dealt with in the normal way under electoral registration procedures. Those forms would simply declare what information was required. We do not need to cover that in the Bill; there are other ways in which to do it. However, it is correct that the form would ask for the provision of that information.

Mr. William Ross: We have held an interesting and quite lengthy debate on the clause and its several amendments. There is one point in the clause that caught my eye and to which I draw the Minister's attention. Subsection (6) states:

"No declaration of local connection shall be specially made by a person for the purposes of local government elections".

How on earth are we to know whether people are making their declaration for that or for some other purpose? If they make a declaration for parliamentary elections, they will be able to vote in local elections anyway.

Mr. O'Brien: The aim is to ensure that people are making a declaration that they have a local connection. They would then be included on the electoral register and would be able to vote in local or national elections, as appropriate, if they were qualified to do so. I do not think that we need to take the matter any further. However, if the hon. Gentleman is not satisfied with that answer, perhaps the best way to proceed would be for me to consider his point in detail and to write to him.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 7

SERVICE DECLARATIONS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this we will discuss amendment No. 105, in schedule 1, page 22, line 37, leave out "12 months" and insert "service".

Mr. William Ross: Over the years that I acted as an election agent, looking after the interests of my party in

[Mr. William Ross]

relation to electoral registration, I always had difficulty with people serving in the armed forces and with the service declaration. Sometimes, those involved failed to submit the declaration—they failed to claim their place on the electoral register. Sometimes, they told me that they had difficulty in obtaining the necessary form from their officers. In a small way, that has been a bone of contention for many years—although it is, no doubt, an important enough matter to those who are affected by it.

The amendment would remove the reference to the 12-month period and would replace it with a reference to the end of service in the armed forces. If that were done, it would resolve the difficulties that have been experienced by some soldiers, sailors and airmen over the years. It would then be a simple matter for the military authorities to inform the electoral officer as soon as an individual had left the services. The amendment is an effort to make the matter simpler for all concerned.

Will the Minister consider my proposal? It may well be that other ancillary amendments would be necessary. I have not considered the matter in enough detail to be certain of that. If the Minister would consider my proposal, it would be a step forward; it would certainly make life easier for those serving in the armed forces who want to remain registered at their homes. Will the Minister give me his views on the matter, and tell me whether he will consider the point?

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am sure that the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) makes a valid point to which the Minister will respond. My question relates to clause 7 rather than to the amendment. For as long as I can remember, there has always been the service declaration for people in the services who live abroad. I have never been aware that other people who are abroad on Government service—such as civil servants, foreign press officials and diplomatic officials—may have a similar method of registration.

My question to the Minister—I appreciate that it is against the backdrop of overseas voter provision—is whether he will place on the record which categories of Government employees, in addition to members of the armed services, can avail themselves of the declaration possibility, irrespective of the proposed amendment that the Bill will make to current law. It would help if he clarified that.

Mr. Fabricant: I welcome clause 7. It abolishes a discriminatory element that previously existed in the Representation of the People Act 1983.

The service declaration was introduced by the Conservative Government to make it easier for people who had worked in the armed services to vote when they were overseas, but obviously, with the provisions for overseas registration, that is no longer necessary. I note that those with a service declaration will still be able to use it. However, perhaps the Minister will confirm that they will be given the additional option of registering in the same way as other voters.

Interestingly, had amendment No. 1, tabled by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman), passed through the House—in the event, the right hon. Gentleman withdrew it—people serving overseas in the armed forces may well have had their right to vote removed. Although the right hon. Gentleman denied that that was the case, many hon. Members felt that the provisions of his amendment would have disfranchised those people serving the country. That would have been completely wrong.

As the clause removes an element of discrimination, I welcome it.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Amendment No. 105, tabled by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), would raise some problems. Let me first deal with the point raised by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes); that will lead me on to deal with the point raised by the hon. Member for East Londonderry.

There are effectively two groups of people who can make service declarations—members of the armed forces and members of the diplomatic service, together with British Council employees based overseas. Service declarations made by diplomats last 12 months; the Bill does nothing to change that. However, declarations made by members of the armed forces currently last indefinitely and expire only when the person concerned is no longer eligible—the moment when they leave the forces.

Although that may sound a desirable state of affairs that ensures that service personnel remain on the electoral register, it has perverse effects. Members of the armed forces generally make a service declaration when they enlist. As that is often at the age of 18, they usually register in respect of their parents' address, but thereafter no one reminds them as a matter of course that they are registered, or that their service declaration may need to be updated. We do not want to place on the armed forces the extra burdens of working out where people are registered and dealing with all those issues.

Service declarations may be in force for many years after they are made. The service man's parents may long since have died or moved house, but he may still be registered in respect of his former address. Even more absurdly, when he is in this country, he may live, with his spouse and children, in a property that he owns, but because he has forgotten that long ago he made a service declaration, he is still registered in respect of the address that he left when he was 18.

We do not believe that that is right. Nor is it satisfactory that, uniquely among electors, members of the armed forces are not given an annual reminder to renew their registration and ensure that it properly reflects their circumstances. Accordingly, the Bill will bring service personnel's service declarations into line with other service declarations by causing them to last for a year. Registration officers will, of course, remind those registered in this way that their declarations—

It being Ten o'clock, THE CHAIRMAN *left the Chair to report progress and ask leave to sit again.*

Committee report progress.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Representation of the People Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

Question again proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I was outlining our procedure for service declarations. We want to ensure that those registered are able to vote, but that that should not be an indefinite right bearing in mind that their circumstances may change. Registration officers will remind those registered that their declarations are about to expire and offer them the opportunity to renew them.

Mr. William Ross: Is the Minister telling us that, from now on, registration officers will write to service personnel at their home addresses where they are registered, so that they will have the opportunity of renewing their place on the electoral register?

Mr. O'Brien: That is indeed the case. Members will want to be reassured that the change has been made with the agreement of the services, whom we consulted on the matter. The reminder that will go to service personnel that they should continue to renew each year their right to vote is worthwhile in citizenship terms and will provide the assurance that we shall not have completely out-of-date registers. That is a worthwhile change that the Committee should support. I therefore invite the hon. Gentleman to withdraw his amendment.

I also invite the Committee to agree that clause 7 should stand part of the Bill. One of the Bill's key purposes is to make it easier for people to register as electors. That is true for all electors, but especially for service personnel among whom registration rates have traditionally been low. At present, those with a service qualification—members of the armed forces, diplomats and certain other public servants posted overseas—can register only by means of a service declaration even if they are resident for the time being in this country.

The working party recommended that this restriction should be removed and the clause will achieve that. It will introduce much greater flexibility into the system. Those with service qualifications will still be entitled to register by means of a service declaration, but the clause will give them the additional option of registering in the same way as other voters if they satisfy the residence criteria, or as overseas voters, bearing in mind the discussions that we have had and may well have about such voters. There is no reason why those with a service qualification should be forced to register in a particularly burdensome way when they do not wish to do so. Again, the services support this change.

We hope that by removing that requirement, we will increase registration rates among service people. I hope that the Committee will accept the clause.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1

REGISTRATION: AMENDMENTS OF 1983 ACT

Mr. Linton: I beg to move amendment No. 85, in page 18, line 24, at end insert—

"(2A) The requirement at subsection (2)(a) above for the inclusion of the name of the person to be registered shall not apply where, in the opinion of the registration officer, inclusion would be prejudicial to the safety of that person.".

The amendment would allow electoral registration officers to register certain voters anonymously if it is considered that publication of their addresses would render them liable to danger. For the avoidance of doubt, let me make it clear that this is not the junk-mail amendment whereby people can opt to keep their names off the edited version of the register so that they are not inundated with junk mail. This might be better described as the battered wife or Jill Dando amendment. It would allow the names of vulnerable voters to be left off the register so that they could not be traced by a stalker, a violent ex-spouse or a vengeful ex-prisoner, but would retain their entitlement to vote.

Mr. Fabricant: I was interested in the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks and can see some force behind his argument, but who would determine whether someone is at risk? Would it be the voter concerned, the police, or someone else?

Mr. Linton: I thought that it was becoming clear that with this amendment, the electoral registration officer could decide to register certain voters anonymously. It is quite different from the amendment to clause 9 under which the voter could opt to be excluded from an edited version of the register. I do not want to anticipate the debate on clause 9, but that amendment concerns the balance of convenience between avoiding the junk mail that people receive if they are on the register and the credit that they may not be able to get if they are not on it.

This amendment is about much more than a balance of convenience; it may be a matter of life or death. It embodies one of the recommendations of the Home Affairs Committee report in September 1998. I urge the Minister and the Committee to give it serious consideration.

Mr. Grieve: I do not know how much detail the hon. Gentleman can go into about how the system would work. If the system would leave blanks on the register so that it would be noticeable that certain properties were not registered, would not that in itself alert people who consult the register to the fact that there is an anomaly? How would the system work in respect of the person concerned voting on polling day?

Mr. Linton: During our evidence sessions, the Home Affairs Committee heard that there are several categories of people whose safety can be put at risk if their name appears on the electoral register. That certainly includes battered wives, but also people in occupations that make them vulnerable to attack. Prison warders and police officers are two examples. Not everybody in those categories would need anonymity, but there may be individual cases in which it is required. Another example

[Mr. Linton]

is people who have been victims of stalking or other forms of obsessional behaviour, particularly where there has been police surveillance or protection.

We do not recommend that the voter should be able to opt to go ex-register in the same way that one can go ex-directory in the telephone system because we want this provision to be used only in exceptional circumstances. We do not want it to be used for the wrong reasons, such as to avoid tax or jury service.

At the moment, a few vulnerable people keep their name off the electoral register. That is technically an offence and can attract a £1,000 fine, but as we heard earlier, nobody is ever prosecuted. We heard evidence from the Association of Local Authority Chief Executives that some electoral registration officers use devices to give anonymity to people who have good reason to avoid being identified.

One device that we know is used is allowing married women to use their maiden names to make it more difficult for people to trace them. Another is to allow them to use false names so that their husbands or ex-husbands cannot find them. Registration officers acknowledge that they may be at risk of challenge in using such devices; in other words, they do not know whether they are legal.

The Local Government Association suggested in its evidence to the Committee that people could be registered with names but no addresses under the "other voters" listed in every ward. That answers the point made by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve).

Another suggestion came from the Association of Electoral Administrators. It argued that to put the names in the list of other voters that appears at the end of every ward register might in some circumstances give too much of a clue about where someone lives. A determined ex-husband might, especially in small wards, be able to trace a person once they know roughly where that person lives. Electoral administrators therefore argued that there should be a constituency-wide list of anonymous electors, which would make it much more difficult to track people down.

All organisations that represent registration officers ask for an explicit ability to register voters anonymously. They point out that that right existed under the community charge register. It was used by very few people, but it existed so that registers could not be used as a way of tracing people who might be in danger.

I suggest that registration officers should have the power both to list vulnerable voters in a list of anonymous voters at the end of the register if their addresses need protection, and to list them under a permanent polling number if their names need protection. Clearly, something must appear on the register, but the mere existence of a polling number rather than a name would not give anyone a clue to an address.

Such an argument of course implies that there should be yet another version of the electoral register. If clause 9 is agreed, there will be two versions: a full version of the register, which will be available for public inspection and to political parties, and an edited version, which will be sold commercially. The amendment implies a third version, which would be available only in the polling station to polling station officers for use in the election. The version that would be available for public inspection and to political parties would omit the names of vulnerable people or list them as anonymous names to protect their identity.

The provision of a full unpublished register would allow the inclusion of two further pieces of information that are sometimes necessary to prevent fraud. Some fathers give their sons their own names, down even to their middle names, and the only way in which to distinguish them is by date of birth. An unpublished register would enable the inclusion of dates of birth, making—one hopes—each person's electoral registration unique. Unusual first names also make it difficult to distinguish the gender of the voter. Gender could also be included on such a register. That is an incidental advantage that the amendment might bring.

I am not arguing for more information on the public register, but for less. Irrespective of what happens to clause 9, I hope that the Minister and the Committee will agree to give electoral registration officers the right for which they have asked to protect the identity of vulnerable voters.

Considering a Bill in Committee on the Floor of the House often provides a better platform but creates a more formal atmosphere in which sometimes it is more difficult to persuade Ministers to take on board the force of an argument. However, I hope that Ministers will seriously consider the amendment, which is supported by the entire Home Affairs Committee and all organisations that are intimately involved in electoral registration.

10.15 pm

Mr. Greenway: As the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) knows from Second Reading, I have a great deal of sympathy with the Home Affairs Committee recommendation. I am not entirely clear whether his amendment provides a complete solution. In particular, the fact that other members of a person's family may be on the register creates a difficulty.

Even if clause 9 is agreed to in its present form—we hope that it will not be for many reasons—that will not be a solution. The full register will still be available in libraries. Stalkers, or former boy friends or husbands of women who have suffered serious domestic violence, can if they wish, and if they are as deranged as I have described, use whatever means are necessary to check where those women may be living.

I am not entirely clear how many people would qualify to come into the category that we are discussing. I suspect that there would be only a few. Those facing a problem would clearly be on an electoral register in terms of their right to vote but would not appear on it either by name or address.

We are all used to campaigning and canvassing on electoral registers that show gaps. About a quarter of the people on a register move from one address to another during a complete year. The absence of an address, let alone a name, from a register would not of itself spark any prospect of people thinking, "Somebody important must live there." Many addresses are missing from registers.

Mr. Barnes: The Bill will introduce a rolling register and a monthly update will take place.

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. He may be right in some respects. However,

I understand that the requirement to publish a register for public scrutiny is only an annual event and not something that would be done routinely each time there are changes in the register. The opportunity for someone to get hold of the register would be limited in using it to check which properties are not accompanied by a name and address.

I wish to send a message to the Minister that we support the concept of action being taken. The Select Committee's report pointed out that the issue had not yet been considered by the working party. Was the working party unable to consider the matter in any detail? If that is the position, perhaps we should ask the Minister to consider the matter and produce a proposal that we could all support. That would allow people who feel that they are vulnerable to physical assault as a result of others finding out where they are to make their position clear. As I said on Second Reading, there is still a general suspicion that the murderer of Jill Dando may have been a stalker. Her address may have been discovered through an entry in a register that was available for public scrutiny. That cannot be dismissed lightly as something of no significance. Indeed, it is extremely important.

An opt-out box was considered because of the potential threat of violence. However, there was no great body of evidence that that was a big issue for most people. It might have been for a few.

The fact that electoral registration officers are looking to the House and to the Government to find a solution should be the final encouragement to the Minister to do so. Given the likely date of Report, it may not be possible for the House to find a solution in the Bill. However, even with the short timetable that the Minister has in mind to get the Bill on the statute book so that the pilot schemes can go ahead, I urge him to try to find a mechanism that could be approved by the other place and that the House could then approve in a very short time.

Mr. Grieve: I want to make it clear to the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) that I broadly support what he is trying to achieve. The purpose of the questions that I posed in my intervention was not to destroy his basic premise, but to raise a number of issues. My understanding is—it is clearly his view, too—that as matters stand there is some discretion. Various ideas have been worked out by electoral registration officers to deal with this problem informally, in the absence of anything specific on the statute. The worrying thing about the amendment is that, by clarifying what is allowed and what is not, it may fetter the discretion of electoral registration officers, so we must get it right.

I am concerned that if we had a system that put the names of known people at the bottom of an electoral register covering what in cities can be quite small wards, nothing would be better calculated to alert people to the fact that those people live in a small, circumscribed area. If a person were sufficiently unpleasant to want to unearth someone's address, such a system might provide the very pointers that the hon. Gentleman is trying to remove.

That is why I am concerned about the amendment, although I suspect that it has been tabled so that this matter can be aired. If it were passed and included in the Bill, it might be counterproductive. I favour the system under which people can use pseudonyms, which ensures that addresses are filled in. I take the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) made, that blanks on the electoral register have never been a source of great consternation to those looking at it, but I see no reason why pseudonyms cannot be used in exceptional circumstances. They provide the anonymity that people are seeking, while ensuring that the register shows both the number of people and who is living in the area that it covers. I suggest to the Minister that that may be a better way forward, but I await with interest to hear what he has to say on this topic.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Like other hon. Members, I understand the position that the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) has adopted. The Select Committee on Home Affairs and the electoral registration officers have asked us to look into this matter, so we must properly consider it. We need to go down this road very carefully. I want to flag up several problems that could arise if people are allowed to go off the electoral register.

First, if we are to have such a system, it must apply common standards, be carefully adjudicated and monitored and not allow too much discretion. In our constituencies—we all know our own best—many people may want to avail themselves of this provision. I regularly get people in my surgery who justifiably complain that they are being harassed for racial or other reasons. They may want to come off the electoral register. Some people may make a similar application for family reasons, because of past or present domestic violence. People summoned to serve in a jury trial may be vulnerable from the moment they are identified as a juror in a serious armed robbery, murder or drugs case.

Witnesses in criminal cases, or those believed to be witnesses, might want to be taken off the register. The same might apply to those who, without any real evidence, believed themselves to be the subject of revenge attacks: the families of people convicted of offences might well be thought to have it in for those who were party to the process. Those of us who live in or represent inner cities are accustomed to revenge attacks. This morning, I talked to a constituent whose husband is missing. She and the family believe that he may be dead as a result of a violent attack; no one quite knows. Such events lead to similar circumstances in a number of cases.

Judges, magistrates, policemen and doctors might want to be removed from the register. The list is very long, and I fear that, once the door was opened, it would be opened to, potentially, a great many people, and the concept of the register as the place where citizenship is recorded for the purpose of participation in the electoral process would become a very different concept.

My second point is technical. All politicians know that, especially in these days of computers and database-held electoral registers, it is not difficult to track people down. If I could not find Martin Linton of Battersea on this year's register, it would not be difficult for me to consult last year's register, or the register for the year before. The fact that Martin Linton is not on this year's register will not stop me from tracking him down if I am determined to do so. If someone leaves a message in my constituency office and I have no address for that person, we can track him down pretty quickly, and it is not difficult to do that in a wider context.

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

Thirdly, the test proposed by the amendment is whether an individual would be prejudiced. It suggests that a person's name should not be included on the register if

"inclusion would be prejudicial to the safety of that person".

That should be considered in the contexts of terrorism and of freedom of information. What is prejudice—substantial prejudice, or some prejudice? A range of issues are involved.

Mr. Linton: Most of the points raised by the hon. Gentleman are answered by the simple fact that the electoral registration officer, rather than the individual, would make the decision. The amendment is primarily intended for, and would be of use mainly to, battered wives who moved and wanted to ensure that their husbands could not trace them. Someone who has lived in the same house for 30 years can be traced through earlier registers. I can be traced through the telephone directory. Most of the jurors mentioned by the hon. Gentleman would also be easily traceable, because they would not have known in the past that a threat would be posed to them, and therefore would not have taken precautions. I am thinking of people who try to move away from danger and find that the inclusion of their names on the electoral register gives their pursuers a chance to track them down.

Mr. Hughes: I entirely understand what the hon. Gentleman says. My point is that in the case of a potentially large category, the issue is for how long a person might want to claim that his or her safety was at risk, looking both backward and ahead.

A huge number of my constituents, if asked whether they felt vulnerable and harassed, might well say that they did. I understand the hon. Gentleman's proposition: they would need to consult the electoral registration officer, who would make the decision. However, the perception of what constitutes a risk to safety in my constituency and that of the hon. Gentleman might be very different from the perception in other constituencies, where there might be few applicants in comparison with the number in multiracial, multicultural communities where attitudes are much less tolerant and there has been a tradition of attacks.

10.30 pm

I come to my final point. I do not want to make a great deal of it; I want simply to state the facts. There about 20 Members, of whom I am one, who have special protection because of such threats. I hope that we will never allow anyone who wants to stand for election to avail themselves of the opportunity not to be included on the register. To be allowed not to reveal where one lives cannot be consistent with seeking office as a councillor, Greater London Authority member or Member of Parliament.

I say all that in the light of the fact that colleagues from Northern Ireland have far more experience than the rest of us of such circumstances. They have kept a public presence in the face of huge risks. Some colleagues have suffered personally from those risks. We need to be careful that, in seeking to deal with a specific and proper concern when people move to a hostel or other address, we do not suddenly open the floodgates—with the electoral register no longer substantially comprising those who are eligible to vote, and with many people not on that register but, perhaps, without protection from discovery by those who are keen to track down where they are.

Mr. William Ross: I find myself in general agreement with the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), to some extent for the reasons that he mentioned in relation to Northern Ireland Members. I have at one time or another received all sorts of weird and wonderful information on how to protect myself and to conceal where I live. Everyone knows where I live. For heaven's sake, I could not hide it because I live in a fairly republican area. The IRA already knows where I live. One has only to ask someone in the village, town or county. The idea that we can hide ourselves away in a little corner in this country for ever and no one will find us is sheer nonsense. It just cannot be done.

I appreciate what the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) is trying to do and what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey has said about crime and its dangers, but the only way to protect citizens from such behaviour is by having an efficient police force, so that those who indulge in attacks on people for vengeance, or for whatever reason, are nearly 100 per cent. certain of getting caught and suffering severely for it. That is the way to stop the criminal elements imposing their will on people.

In Northern Ireland generally, many thousands of men and women served part-time in the security forces, and in situations incomparably more dangerous than anything on this side of the Irish sea. The idea that those people could hide either their identity or place of residence was nonsense; it was known. We cannot allow our society to get into a situation where everyone wants to hide from the violent and the criminal—that way lies nothing but domination by the violent and the criminal.

We should keep that in mind. We should be prepared to allow our names to go on to the electoral register. We should expect society to protect us from evil doers whenever we give evidence against them. There is no running away from a citizen's responsibility, and we should not do anything that would encourage people even to try that.

Mr. Fabricant: The whole Committee supports the principle of the amendment, but there is considerable doubt about its practicalities. I will come to my main criticism of the amendment shortly: the burden that it puts on electoral registration officers, who are already overburdened and under-resourced.

The hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) gave several detailed examples. He talked about the use by battered wives of their maiden names. I do not think that that would prevent a husband from finding his wife. He said that exclusions would happen only in exceptional cases. That might mean exceptional blanks on the electoral register, but in practice someone could be found very easily. If the provision were used more generally, it would be more difficult to locate those who use it. However, I am not so sure that, in the democratic process, the provision should be used in cases that are less than exceptional.

The amendment states that

"inclusion of the name of the person to be registered shall not apply where, in the opinion of the registration officer, inclusion would be prejudicial to the safety of that person."

I do not believe that a registration officer on his own would be qualified to make that type of decision.

If the Minister supports the general principle in the amendment, he must say whether he wants registration officers alone to make decisions on anonymity, based on a very tight code of conduct, or whether another agency—such as the police or local social services—should provide an input before he makes the decision.

Mr. Linton: Had the hon. Gentleman been a member of the Home Affairs Committee at the time—he has joined since—he would know that the Association of Electoral Authorities suggested that applications to electoral registration officers should come from either police officers or social workers, so that there would be input from professionals with first-hand knowledge of risk assessment. Nevertheless, the decision would still lie with the registration officer.

Mr. Fabricant: It is reassuring to know that, although I am a new member of the Home Affairs Committee, I have independently reached the same conclusion on the matter that it did. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention.

I do not agree with one of the arguments against the amendment made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), namely, that people who are planning to persecute or attack someone would examine previous registration documents. If that were a valid argument, we should never make such a change to the system. The point is that if there is to be change, it will have to be made at some point. Moreover, as the hon. Member for Battersea said in reply to the point, the change would at least stop someone pursuing the individual as he or she moves from place to place.

The Home Office should consider the issue seriously. Although I do not think that amendment No. 85 is practicable, I should like to know whether the Government plan to include in the Bill a provision to ensure that battered wives, witnesses and all the other people who are under threat and have been mentioned in the debate will be able to sleep safely and soundly in their beds.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This has been a useful debate, as it has raised a very serious issue. The Home Affairs Committee took the view that there should be some form of anonymous registration—for those whom some people may describe as secret voters, as they would not be known to the political parties.

The working party on electoral procedures also examined the issue. It agreed that there was a problem, and was sympathetic to the need to resolve it. However, it felt that, even with its expertise—there was substantial expertise in the working party—it was not in a position to determine precisely how a secret voting system could be established and administered.

Therefore—although we all have much sympathy for those involved in such situations, and think that there is a problem that has to be dealt with—I think that the view of the Committee is that the subject requires more study than we have so far been able to give it, and I cannot provide any reassurance that I shall be able to support an amendment to the Bill to address the issue in the manner that we have been discussing today.

Clause 9, however, has some relevance to the issue. If we were to include in the Bill clause 9 as drafted, it would provide some protection, as there would be two registers, one of which—a full register, including all the relevant names—would be available to the political parties, and another of which would be available only to some organisations.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I am anxious to proceed, as the Committee wishes to get on. I shall make my points and if the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene later, I will happily give way.

I accept that there is a genuine problem, but we now have interactive search software which makes it easier to trace people. Electoral registers can be on CD-Roms, which can be given away free with computer magazines. Therefore, searching for first names and surnames is remarkably easy. Clause 9 might provide some assistance in this area, and it remains to be seen what view the House takes. The Government have listened carefully to representations on the matter.

We need to see how we proceed with clause 9, but I accept that there is an issue here. There are some problems with the proposals that my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) has made for the best of reasons. First, the parties will not know who is on the electoral register if some people are, in effect, secret voters. Those people will not be able to participate fully. They will not be able to receive the election address of the various candidates because the candidates will not know where these people are. It is possible to solve that problem, but we would have to work out a procedure to do so.

What would we do about the members of the family of the secret voter? Would they remain secret and off the register, known only to the electoral registration officer? That needs to be addressed.

I associate myself with the concerns of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) about battered spouses and the victims of stalkers. We can accept that, but what about police officers, prison officers, some Members of Parliament or Child Support Agency officials? We could go on and list those who, for all sorts of reasons, feel that they and their families may not wish to prejudice their safety.

The proposals would put the electoral registration officer in a difficult position in deciding who to exclude. The amendment states that it would be

"in the opinion of the electoral registration officer"

that registration would be prejudicial to safety. That is not a clear test and, in many ways, is very subjective. The registration officer would be very much open to legal challenge, and we would probably have to set up an appeals system to deal with the issues. It would become very difficult for the registration officer to refuse secret registration in such situations.

I find myself in substantial agreement with the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, in that we must approach this matter with a great deal more care.

[Mr. O'Brien]

There are serious issues here, but I suggest that we take the approach of the working party on electoral procedures and study this matter more before we legislate in haste and repent at leisure.

Mr. Fabricant: Have any representations been made to the Home Office either by the police, who have long-term witnesses, or by people such as Salman Rushdie, who have been in hiding for a period of longer than a year—seeking to vote but unable to do so?

Mr. O'Brien: I have had some personal representations from people who feel that they would prefer not to have their names on the register. I am not aware that letters have been received at the Home Office, although there is a real issue here which deserves further study. I cannot guarantee that that study will be completed so that we can introduce something in the Bill.

Mr. Linton: I urge my hon. Friend to make a clear distinction between clause 9 and the amendment. People who want to avoid junk mail will not be in the least bit worried by the fact that people can look at the full register at their local library—no one is going to go through the whole register by hand, without being able to copy it, simply to send someone else junk mail—but a battered wife cannot live with the knowledge that a violent or vengeful husband can track her down simply by going to the local reference library. It is an entirely different issue.

However, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

10.45 pm

Mr. William Ross: I beg to move amendment No. 111, in page 19, line 20, leave out "October" and insert "September".

The import of the amendment is clear. In Northern Ireland, the date has been 15 September for as long as I can remember and probably longer; I do not know why, other than to give people more time to explore the possibilities of fraud in the Northern Ireland registers. There may be other reasons.

We have the opportunity to apply the same date throughout the United Kingdom for what will become the basic register on which the rolling procedure will operate. There are several advantages to 15 September. It would create uniformity throughout the United Kingdom and simplify the position of university students.

A member of my family is at a Scottish university, so I know that the year tends to start early there, in September, but lots of universities start somewhat later than that, and one of the bones of contention that I have found on this side of the Irish sea is that those who leave home before the October date on which they are to be registered are away from home at the qualifying date and could legitimately register either at their place of study or at home.

If we move the date to 15 September, most university students in the United Kingdom will be registered at their home address and it will be much easier to keep track of them when they change thereafter. There is a definite advantage in that.

As the schedule says that the register must be published by 1 December, the 15 September date would give registration officers an extra month and people would have more time to check whether they were on the register. Elections rarely take place in December or January. I remember two, neither of which was very successful for some folk. One of them brought me here and the other, known as the snowman's election, was rather earlier in Northern Ireland.

There are advantages in having a uniform date throughout the United Kingdom. The Bill says that revised registers can be published if many changes are made. I suspect that that will not happen and that, despite all the high hopes that some have expressed, we will wind up producing one register for an electoral area and it will remain largely unchanged throughout the year. I suspect that people will not take as much advantage or notice of the rolling registration as the Bill's progenitors hope.

The amendment represents a straightforward change that would have certain advantages for the whole country and for the way in which the register is compiled. I invite the Minister to tell us why it should not be made.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am not in a position to reflect the concerns of the people of Northern Ireland, but the amendment raises two issues. The first, which is on all fours with a point made by the hon. Member for East Londonderry, is that it would seem to be a great advantage to have a national date on which registration for voting occurs, as well as having the rolling register in the background. I have made the point before in relation to the build-up to the census that people do not feel that registering is important. A form comes through the letter box, and if one does not fill it in, one gets another letter. One does not have the sense that the form has to be completed by a certain date.

The second point is that the date cycle works on the basis that the forms are delivered in August and collected for a date in October for a register that comes into effect in February—normally for an electoral cycle in May. That means that people fill in the form in August or September and by the time the register comes into force, it is four months out of date. By the time the election arrives, it is eight months out of date. We need a cycle that minimises the time between the form being filled in, the registration becoming valid and people feeling part of the process.

The rolling register will alter the situation slightly, but I take the hon. Gentleman's point that we will need to encourage people annually to register. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us whether the working group reflected on that point. Even if we do not make a decision today, we should consider the cycle carefully to maximise the chance of people getting on the electoral register.

The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) has always made the point that we lose millions of people from the register, and everything we do must be geared to getting the maximum number of people on to the register. The Bill will try to do that, but I am not sure that the cycle of registration has yet achieved it.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I recognise that under current arrangements the qualifying date for registration in Northern Ireland is just under a month earlier than that for the rest of Britain—15 September compared with 10 October. In future there will not be a single annual qualifying date as people will be able to register at any point of the year. That is the effect of the rolling registration programme, but there will still be a requirement for electoral registration officers to carry out an annual canvass.

I see the benefits of the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), but it would lengthen by a month the period between the date by reference to which the annual registration canvass is to be held and the date on which the register based on that canvass is published. It would also require the canvass to be held over what is for many parts of the United Kingdom—including whole towns in some areas—a major holiday period.

I understand that the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland has been consulted and is happy about the proposed changes. He does not anticipate any particular difficulty about moving to an October date for his canvass. I am therefore reluctant to accept the amendment.

The hon. Gentleman explained his concern about an October date and the fact that university students will be away from home on the date in question. Under the present law, students may register in respect of their home address even if they are not physically present there on the qualifying date. They may also register in respect of their university or college address. That will not be changed by the new provisions governing registration, so young people from Northern Ireland who are studying at institutions outside the Province will continue to be able to register in respect of their home addresses—as well as, if they wish, in respect of their university or college address. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will withdraw his amendment on that basis.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) mentioned the working party. I do not know whether it considered the issue, but I shall write to him on that point.

Mr. William Ross: I have listened to what I consider to be the weak case made by the Minister. He said that the date will be put back a month, but the publication date could be brought forward a month, if that is all that is worrying the Government. I still take the view that the canvass date is simply replacing the present qualifying date. In my view, there is no good reason why 15 September should not be chosen. The evenings are long at that time of year, so when the part-time workers go round collecting the household forms they do so in the light. The long winter nights that set in during October make the job more difficult and render people—especially those in rural areas—less willing to open the door to strangers.

The last major holiday in Northern Ireland is at the end of August. The household forms go out in the same month, and I assume that that is true too of Great Britain. I see no difficulty in what I propose, but there seems to be a prejudice on this side of the Irish sea against following the example of what is done in Northern Ireland. Electoral registration is, and always has been, much better there than on the mainland.

I hope that the Minister will not ignore what I have said, and that he will consider the proposal further. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. William Ross: I beg to move amendment No. 112, in page 20, line 43, after "publish", insert

"in print and in electronic format".

This amendment is as straightforward as amendment No. 111. It proposes that the register should be made available on computer disk as well as on paper. At present, the register is available in that format, but it has to be sent away for transcription. I want people to be able to put the disk into their computers much more easily than is the case at present.

I hope that the Minister will accept the amendment. It proposes no more than what is already common practice, and should be put on the face of the Bill.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I cannot accept the amendment, as it is simply unnecessary. Registration officers are already required to make the electoral register available in paper form and, where it is produced electronically, in an electronic format. As all electoral registration officers now produce their registers on computer, the register can be obtained, on payment of the appropriate fee, in either format. Copies can even be reserved in advance.

We will shortly discuss the possibility that the full electoral register will be available in an electronic format. Although that is a separate matter, people entitled to the full electoral register will be able to get it on paper or in the electronic format. The edited register will also be for sale in both formats.

One problem in the past has been that the format used for the register was not always compatible with all computers, with the result that it had to be transcribed to another, more suitable, format. Requiring the electoral registration officer to undertake such a transcription for all personal computers would be onerous and unnecessary. In my experience, such problems in the United Kingdom have been overcome by the major political parties.

11 pm

Mr. Barnes: The Minister's point is that the electronic format was purchased; but should not political parties, in addition to being issued with the published version, be able to have access to the disk as well without being involved in massive expenditure? I hope that that will be considered.

Mr. O'Brien: I hear what my hon. Friend says. It is a valid point in many ways, but if extra expenditure will be occasioned for the taxpayer by reason of this proposal, it must be considered with care. It is not an invalid point because, as my hon. Friend would no doubt tell me were he not in a sedentary position, this is all about paying for democracy. The issue will have to be weighed in the balance, and I shall certainly consider what my hon. Friend has said. The electronically formatted register is already available, and although I agree with the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), the amendment is unnecessary.

Mr. Ross: The point that was well made by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) was the

[Mr. Ross]

very point that I was trying to bring to the attention of the Committee. The register is on tape, and transcribing it costs quite a lot of money. I believe that since the present systems were set up, technology has moved forward so fast and so far that there are now bound to be much cheaper methods of doing this. Compact disks can carry a huge amount of information, and I do not believe that it would cost all that much for electoral officers throughout the United Kingdom to have a system in which their tapes could be transcribed on to disks and made available at a much lower cost than at present.

Mr. O'Brien: Perhaps I can be of assistance to the hon. Gentleman. The best approach might be to consult the electoral registration officers and see what difficulties, or otherwise, might be occasioned by the proposal. I could then write to the hon. Gentleman and, if such an approach is feasible, we may be able to do something in another place. I cannot guarantee that, or undertake to do it, but we can certainly consult with the electoral registration officers.

Mr. Ross: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. As we are spending some money, perhaps a bit more can be found if need be. In the light of the Minister's remarks, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 58, in page 21, line 39, after "above;", insert—

"(ca) is notified of any decision on an appeal by virtue of section 56 below which requires any such alteration in the register as is mentioned in subsection (4) of that section;".

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 61, 64 and 65.

Mr. O'Brien: These are minor drafting amendments. They deal with the point at which alterations to the register have been the subject of an appeal. I shall not outline them to the House at this stage of the proceedings unless any hon. Member particularly requests it.

Amendment agreed to.

Mr. Barnes: I beg to move amendment No. 44, in page 21, line 41, at end insert—

"(1A) The registration officer shall determine an application for an alteration of the register within a period of three working days from receipt of the application.".

The Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 45, in page 21, line 45, leave out from "him" to "and" in line 50 and insert

"not later than the day following the day on which he determines or, as the case may be, becomes satisfied that the alteration should be made".

Government amendments Nos. 59 and 60.

No. 46, in page 22, line 22, at end insert—

"except where a person can demonstrate that he was, before that day, entitled to be registered and where the registration officer makes his determination at least three working days before the election.".

Mr. Barnes: We have an increasingly mobile and rootless society, which has a tremendously adverse effect on electoral registration in the United Kingdom. The Government seek to tackle that problem, but the Bill is unduly restrictive. My amendments, and others to which I shall speak on later occasions, are intended to improve on the Government's proposals.

The problem I seek to tackle is that, while electoral registers do not come into force in Britain until 16 February each year, the person is registered at the address at which he or she was resident on 10 October in the preceding year. The Bill proposes to remove the 10 October qualifying date so that someone who moves to a new area may transfer his or her electoral registration without having to wait up to 16 months. When people move or die, their registration will be deleted from the original register.

That is fine as far as it goes, but the Bill has shortcomings in that the transferred registration will become effective only when it is published on a supplementary monthly list. Registration submitted within a fortnight before publication of those lists will be held over until the following month's publication. No monthly supplementary list will be published when an election is approaching once the last day for nominations has been reached. When those provisions are combined, in some cases, people seeking to transfer registration five and a half weeks from the close of nominations will not be able to vote in an election in the area of their new residence. We can do better than that.

A transferred registration could become operative as soon as it is accepted and logged into a computer by the electoral returning officer—as happened with the anti-social poll tax. To avoid an area's being subject to a rush of temporary registrations that would distort the result of a by-election, the register could cease to roll on the closing date for nominations, recommencing on the day after polling. However, if someone has moved to an area before the close of nominations but has not registered immediately, his or her registration could still be accepted up to, say, three days before the election.

To make my proposals fit the current Bill, amendment No. 44 proposes that registration should be determined three days after its receipt by the electoral returning officer. In amendment No. 45, I propose that registrations should be published the day after determination, and publication could be on the computer. Amendment No. 46 argues that someone who is late to register, but who qualifies to have registered, can still be put on the appropriate register three working days before an election. I am trying to make the register roll in keeping with modern needs. In later amendments, I shall try to help that process further. The current amendments are only part of my modernisation proposals.

I want to stress the seriousness of this problem. We need stronger provisions to allow the register to roll more genuinely than it would under the Bill. Radical reforms are needed. I gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee on the seriousness of the shortfall in electoral registration. In 1993, the Office for Population, Censuses

and Surveys published a survey by Stephen Smith entitled "Electoral registration in 1991". In the summary of his main findings, Mr. Smith wrote that

"the best estimate of non-registration in private households is therefore between 7.4 per cent. and 9 per cent. for England and Wales."

On the same page, Mr. Smith published a table in which the most serious aspects of non-registration of those eligible were set out. The figures were: 38.2 per cent. of those in private and rented furnished accommodation; 36.6 per cent. of new Commonwealth citizens; 27.6 per cent. of those who have moved over the past year; 24 per cent. of black people; 21.9 per cent. of those under 17—the teenagers soon to have their names on a register; 20.6 per cent. of the 21 to 24 age group; and 20.4 per cent. in inner London. Those serious distortions have considerable effects on electoral registration. The Bill does something to deal with basic problems so that people who move can transfer registration, but we must do much more. I shall introduce amendments on the role of the electoral returning officer in those matters, as part of the whole scheme of things that I am proposing. At present, I am limited to the amendments before the Committee.

My evidence to the Select Committee continued:

"These calculations seem to me to be confirmed by two factors. First, the arguments about the inadequacy of the static registration system"—

I mentioned those earlier. I went on to say that the second was that

"between 1983-96 the shortfall between those registered and the eligible population fell steadily in Britain from 2.2 per cent to 4.9 per cent. This seems to me to fit in with a period in which we have seen a breakdown in certain aspects of the social fabric: which will disproportionately affect groups highlighted in Stephen Smith's survey. A boost was given to non-registration by the impact of the Poll Tax from 1988 where there was an interlink between the Poll Tax and electoral registers."

Probably, about 1 million people were missing from that registration.

My evidence continued:

"It seems to me that Stephen Smith's study of a registration shortfall of between 7.4 per cent and 9 per cent is entirely plausible.

As the shortfall isn't random across society, it will also distort the drawing of electoral boundaries."

If the situation is as serious as the one that I described in my evidence to the Select Committee, we need to take several measures that are stronger than those in the Bill. My amendments are intended to do that—they will set us on a path that will enable us to put the missing millions back on to electoral registers.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) for tabling these amendments, because it gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to him. If there is anybody who can claim to be the father of rolling electoral registration, it is my hon. Friend. He kept the issue alive when it was far from fashionable, and now that it is fashionable, he deserves much credit.

At last, my hon. Friend's efforts are coming to fruition, and I hope that he regards the system of rolling electoral registration that the Bill provides as an important step forward. I use those words carefully. I would be the first to accept that this is not a perfect scheme—it is certainly not the scheme that he would like ideally—but it does represent a significant advance on what exists at present and it will lay the foundations for a more comprehensive rolling registration scheme in years to come.

The system that the Bill provides for was devised by a sub-group of the working party on electoral procedures whose members comprised electoral administrators and representatives of political parties. That is important, because those are the two groups who have the greatest interest in making rolling electoral registration work as effectively as possible; they are in the front line when it comes to receiving complaints from irate members of the public who are unable to vote in a particular election.

In its final report, the working party endorsed the sub-group's recommendations and stated:

"We recommend that the registration scheme should retain the present claims and objections procedure, but that this should be developed to include information necessary to prevent double registrations. Any claim received by the registration officer would only be entered onto the register after a period for public scrutiny and challenge, which would mean that claims received before the 15th day of one month and not requiring to be considered under objections procedure would be entered onto the register from the first day of the following month."

The scheme in the Bill sticks exactly to that timetable. Quite simply, the electoral administrators did not believe that the more ambitious timetable that my hon. Friend had in mind would be possible at present. That is why I said that we hope to create a system that will deliver a much better and more effective rolling registration system, but I cannot say that we will deliver the ideal system envisaged by my hon. Friend. We may have that ideal system in future, but unfortunately we may have to wait for a short while before it comes to fruition.

Electoral administrators have many duties and cannot always consider registration applications instantaneously. For example, hon. Members could imagine what might happen if there was a by-election in one ward of a local authority. The registration officer, who might well also be the returning officer in that by-election, would probably be far too busy in the week of the by-election to give instant consideration to registration applications from other wards. Considering and processing applications as they come in, instead of monthly, would require registration officers to issue almost daily alteration lists, which I imagine would not be popular with the political parties or anyone else.

11.15 pm

Finally, there is the important point that electoral registration officers around the country are not currently electronically linked to one another, which is an important prerequisite of a fast-moving rolling registration system. Some 30 different, not necessarily compatible, software systems are being used by electoral registration departments. That sounds trivial. In the modern world one might think that the problem is easy to overcome, but most local authority electoral registration departments use computer systems that are offshoots of the main local authority computer system, so it is a much larger problem.

I hope that I have shown my hon. Friend that the scheme that his amendments seek to introduce, although in many ways very valid and ideal, is at present too ambitious, but I hope that it is something that we can aspire to in the years to come, as our technology improves.

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

Let me say a few words about amendment No. 46. Although we always say that we currently have a fixed register that is compiled annually and cannot be changed during the year, that is not quite true. Currently, anyone who can show that they were qualified on the qualifying date can have their name added to the register at any time of the year. The only exception is that no additions may be made to a register to be used at an election after the closing date for nominations at that election. It has always been felt that parties and candidates—to say nothing of the returning officer—need fixed goalposts during an election campaign and need to know exactly which, and how many, electors they are dealing with. We think that the principle must be preserved. However, amendment No. 46 would breach it.

I hope that on the basis of what I have said, my hon. Friend will feel able to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Finally, I shall say a few words about the two Government amendments. Amendment No. 59 is a simple amendment—although it may not look like it—to tidy up the provisions of the Bill relating to rolling electoral registration.

Under the new system, electoral registration officers will be required to carry out an annual canvass and to publish a revised version of the electoral register on 1 December each year. They will also be required to publish monthly lists of alterations, showing the additions and deletions made in the previous month. However, the working party received very strong advice from electoral administrators that it would not be practical for them to publish monthly alteration lists in October and November, as they would be in the midst of carrying out their annual canvass. The amendment makes that clear.

Amendment No. 60 is a simple drafting amendment. It simply makes it clear that, for reasons that I have explained in connection with amendment No. 46, changes to the register arising from monthly alterations cannot take effect after the last day for nominations in an election.

Mr. Barnes: I appreciate the importance of establishing a principle through Parliament. In the Bill we are establishing the principle of the rolling register. Because we have broken the mould and established that area, some of the further measures that I am seeking will have an opportunity to come into play in future.

The amendments that I have tabled are not quite as difficult as the Minister has suggested. The Association of Electoral Administrators, which has always strongly supported the idea of rolling registers, has taken the lead on this matter, and I am sure that it would be happy to take on board some of my amendments.

However, it would be very churlish of me not to seek to withdraw the amendment after being called the father of the rolling register, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendments made: No. 59, in page 22, line 2, leave out from "in" to end of line 17 and insert

"a case where (apart from this subsection) that subsection would require the notice to be issued—

(a) at the beginning of the month containing the date on which a revised version of the register is next due to be published in accordance with section 13(1) or (3) above, or

(b) at the beginning of either of the two months preceding that containing the date on which a revised version of the register is next due to be published in accordance with section 13(1) above,

and in such a case the alteration in question shall be made in that revised version of the register.".

No. 60, in page 22, line 19, after "effect", insert "under subsection (2) above".

No. 61, in page 22, line 25, leave out from "section" to end of line 26.

No. 62, in page 22, line 40, leave out first "any" and insert "another".

No. 63, in page 22, line 41, leave out "otherwise than" and insert ", whether or not".

No. 64, in page 24, line 13, after "appeal)", insert—

"(a) after 'the registration officer shall' insert ', in accordance with section 13A above,'; and

(b)".

No. 65, in page 24, line 13, at end insert—

"(4) In subsection (4A) (effect of alterations in register), for 'is made under subsection (4) above' substitute 'made in pursuance of subsection (4) above takes effect under section 13(5) or 13A(2) above.".—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Mr. Barnes: I beg to move amendment No. 55, in page 26, line 20, leave out "authorising" and insert "requiring".

The Chairman: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 27, in page 26, line 25, at end insert—

"(4A) Provisions authorising a registration officer to inspect, for the purpose of his registration duties, records kept (in whatever form) by categories of persons or bodies, to be specified by the Secretary of State, having information about any person's actual or proposed place of residence or change of place of residence, and to make copies of information contained in such records.".

Mr. Barnes: These amendments deal with the powers and duties of electoral returning officers in seeking to encourage people to register. I believe that electoral returning officers should play a much more proactive role than the Bill provides for.

In amendment No. 55, I would require, rather than just authorise, electoral returning officers to undertake a search for various records. Such duties should clearly be placed on electoral returning officers, although I agree that they should have the facilities and the resources to be able to carry them out.

In amendment No. 27, I would extend the records for which electoral returning officers could search beyond those that are held by local and public authorities. It would allow the Secretary of State to specify categories of people who have information about a person's actual or proposed place of residence or their change of residence. Estate agents, conveyancing solicitors, the former public utilities, such as gas, water, electricity and British Telecom, all have access to details of people's

changed addresses. Consideration should be given to providing electoral returning officers with access to such information so that they can carry out their duties. Privatisation and public-private partnerships are the order of the day, so we are in danger of seeing continuously decreasing boundaries of local and public authorities. My amendment would ensure that there would be no cuts in the areas that electoral returning officers could turn to.

If my suggestions worry people because they perceive that they have big-brother implications for the work of electoral returning officers, we should be able to consider the future introduction of confidentiality clauses that would insist that such information would be collected by and would be for the use of electoral returning officers only when they decide whether to transfer, delete, alter or add registration arrangements.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for tabling the amendments because they allow me to pay tribute to one of the senior electoral officers who was on the working party on electoral procedures. Mr. David Monks, who is now the returning officer in Huntingdon, was formerly the returning officer in North Warwickshire, so he was able to declare that I was the elected Member for that constituency. I can guarantee that he is a very competent and careful electoral registration officer and that he has great experience of such matters.

The working party on electoral procedures of which David Monks was a member was very conscious of the difficulties that electoral registration officers have in compiling an accurate register. The great experience that he brought to bear enabled them to express the frustration that they feel in the knowledge that their councils often hold the requisite information, but electoral registration departments cannot get access to it. This issue becomes even more acute under a system of rolling registration when people can amend their electoral registration as soon as they move.

Accordingly the working party made the following recommendation:

"We recognise that there are a range of local authority and other data sources which it would be helpful to the registration officer to be able to consult in carrying out his duties under a rolling registration scheme . . . we recommend that registration officers should be entitled to request and receive information from local authority and other appropriate public data sources in order to allow them properly to carry out their duty of maintaining an accurate and up to date register."

That is an important recommendation and paragraph 23 of schedule 1 is our way of giving effect to it. That paragraph will allow for regulations to be made that will authorise electoral registration officers to consult records held by the local authority and by those who provide services to the authority. That might include the housing department's records or the council tax register.

Amendment No. 55 would require registration officers to consult such records rather than simply allowing them to do so. I have to tell my hon. Friend and the Committee that I think that such a change would not be welcome to electoral registration officers. They have said that they will need no extra encouragement to use a facility that will make their jobs easier.

I do not think that we need to teach electoral registration officers to suck eggs. They have every incentive to ensure that their registers are as accurate and up to date as possible, not least because they are on the receiving end of complaints from those who are left off the register. Experience and the sharing of good practice means that they are best equipped to know how to compile their registers and we should avoid being unduly prescriptive and making their job more difficult.

I have every confidence that once registration officers are given access to local authority records, they will develop techniques for making the most of that access, and we should leave them to get on with it rather than telling them what to do.

My hon. Friend's second amendment would go further. It would allow for regulations to be made enabling the registration officer to consult the records of any person or body who held information about a person's residence. It is hard to know who falls into that category. The obvious answer is the utility companies, and it is true that people will generally notify the electricity and gas boards and the phone company when they move. Equally importantly, they will notify the local authority council tax office to ensure that they do not end up paying council tax on two properties.

Utility companies invariably want a single name for each property to whom they can send bills. I am not sure therefore that utility companies and other organisations necessarily offer useful information above and beyond that held by council tax registers, which is already provided for in the Bill.

Other bodies that have information on people's residence are lawyers, estate agents and other private organisations such as banks. We would be getting into very dangerous privacy and data protection waters if we were to give electoral registration officers access to the records held by such bodies, as the amendment might inadvertently suggest. Indeed the working party warned:

"Registration officers . . . should not be entitled to such access where this would otherwise result in a breach of data protection or other privacy regulations."

I have every sympathy with the motives behind the amendments, but I hope from what I have said that my hon. Friend will realise that the Bill will make a major contribution to ensuring that electoral registration officers can compile accurate registers. I hope, therefore, that he will realise that his amendments are unnecessary and withdraw them.

Mr. Barnes: I have great faith in electoral returning officers, and the best practice is excellent. However, a variety of practices are used, and clearly some registers are much more up to date than others, so best practice needs to be spread. I do not worry about placing duties upon electoral returning officers.

On amendment No. 27, I have faith that electoral returning officers will make good use of the different techniques available to them to get hold of information and to ensure that it is used only for compiling electoral registers. As I said, I should perhaps have tabled another amendment that included a provision for confidentiality that might have dealt with some of the worries expressed by the Minister. As the future will eventually bring improved electoral registration techniques, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 1, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 2

REGISTRATION: OVERSEAS ELECTORS

Question proposed, That this schedule be the Second schedule to the Bill.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I have one question for the Minister, and I will understand if he says that he cannot give me an answer now, but I would be grateful in that case if he would write to me. Schedule 2 amends the Representation of the People Act 1985 in relation to the franchise for the European parliamentary elections. The question that is often asked, when there is an opportunity, is when the Government will bring forward the legislative changes to make sure that the people of Gibraltar can vote in the European parliamentary elections, as they are entitled to do following the European Court ruling that says that they must be able to vote.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I shall write to the hon. Gentleman.

Question put and agreed to.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Schedule 3 agreed to.

To report progress and ask leave to sit again.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Committee report progress; to sit again tomorrow.

Mortgages and Unfair Contract Terms

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

11.30 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I may not look like Barbra Streisand, but since the title of this Adjournment debate was published, I too have known what it is like to be hounded by the paparazzi. It has seemed like every mortgage lender in the country has beaten a path to my door to explain why their products are fair and reasonable, and why others—usually their competitors' products—are not. When I first approached Madam Speaker's Office and proposed a title for this debate, I suggested "Mortgage Rip-Offs". I must compliment the Speaker's assistant secretary for the courtesy and tact that he showed in persuading me that "Mortgages and Unfair Contract Terms" might be more appropriate. So what are these unfair contract terms, and why do so many people feel that they have been treated badly by their mortgage lender?

I shall first examine extended redemption penalties—or lock-ins as they are often known. Back in the days of the Conservative Government in 1994, with a stagnant housing market and the curse of negative equity, mortgage lenders tried to find a way to kick-start the housing market. They offered deals that were front-loaded to home buyers: discounted rates, fixed-rate schemes and even cash back. Clearly, the only way in which lenders could recoup the cost of such low-rate schemes was by locking borrowers into their standard variable rate for several years after the initial incentive had run out.

I am a fair-minded person, and if that were all there were to extended redemption penalties, I would say "fair enough". So what is the problem? It is this: if one signs a contract that committed one for five years to pay a supplier of orange juice, one would expect the contract to specify the cost that one could incur for the whole five years. If the price charged by the supplier could vary from year to year depending on the orange crop harvest, one would expect the fluctuating cost to be related to some index—the orange market juice index, perhaps—which would govern the shift in the cost that one would have to pay for one's juice.

One would not be happy with a contract that allowed the supplier to vary the cost of the orange juice after the first year by any amount that the supplier chose. One would certainly not be happy if the orange market index were falling yet the supplier could charge the same or even a higher cost for the juice or if one faced massive financial penalties for breaking such a contract and refusing to pay that inflated cost.

Such a contract would be one-sided; its terms would be unfair—or, in the language used outside Madam Speaker's Office, a rip-off. One would not be happy, yet that is exactly what happens when one purchases a mortgage with extended redemption penalties.

Let us imagine that someone takes out a two-year fixed rate that locks them in for three years beyond that to the lender's so-called standard variable rate. The person may not appreciate that the standard variable rate does not have to track any external index; it can entirely ignore the Bank of England base rate. Borrowers do not know—indeed, cannot know—what they are signing up to when they

agree to the contract. If subsequently they find that the contract is not acceptable, they face an often more unacceptable premium to bail out.

Two years ago, Mr. Pearson-Miles took out a two-year fixed rate mortgage with the Alliance and Leicester for £75,000. The mortgage was described as "portable". Now, he is moving to a bigger house, and needs to increase his mortgage, but the terms offered by Alliance and Leicester for the new bigger loan are not as favourable as those that it gives even to its new customers, and they are certainly not competitive.

Mr. Pearson-Miles has a choice. He can either pay the higher rate to Alliance and Leicester plc, where he is locked in for the next five years, or he can pay a £3,000 premium to take his mortgage business elsewhere. Mr. Pearson-Miles is unhappy.

Mr. Phillips was even more unhappy. In 1992, the day after the exchange rate mechanism fiasco, he took out a 10-year fixed mortgage with NatWest, at a rate of 9.95 per cent. With interest rates falling to 5.5 per cent., NatWest made a large profit out of Mr. Phillips, who had paid well over the odds for more than five years on his mortgage. Sadly, Mr. Phillips and his wife separated and the house had to be sold after seven years.

One might have expected NatWest to be sympathetic. After all, it had made a huge profit from Mr. Phillips's fixed rate. More than that, he was taking his subsequent mortgage from NatWest. Not a bit of it. NatWest insisted on levying an early redemption charge of £5,000 because Mr. Phillips had paid off his £100,000 debt before the 10 years were up.

In a case cited by the Consumers Association, NatWest asked for £41,000 in a redemption penalty to pay off a £60,000 mortgage. That is £101,000 to pay a £60,000 debt. I think that most people would say that that is a rip-off.

It is sometimes argued by mortgage lenders that lock-ins are not unfair in practice because no lender can afford to have an uncompetitive standard variable rate, so lenders cannot take advantage of borrowers who are locked in by redemption penalties by charging an excessive variable rate. Sadly, that is not true.

Ten years ago, prospective borrowers would compare the variable rates on offer, but that is no longer the position. Most lenders do not use the standard variable rate to compete for new business. They use the much more eye-catching fixed rates or capped-rate deals. Fewer and fewer borrowers every year are on the standard variable rate, without being locked in, because consumers are getting wise to the need to remortgage.

Even between the major high-street lenders there is a broad range where variable rates differ by as much as 0.6 per cent. This variation makes it impossible to tell up front which fixed rate will prove more competitive over the life of the fixed and penalty period combined. Such a lack of transparency in what is normally the largest financial contract most people enter into is a scandal.

There is another scam to which I draw the attention of the House. I call it the corporate come-on. The Halifax and Woolwich building societies are masters at it. At the end of the fixed rate period, they write to the borrower and offer him a further fixed rate deal rather than transferring to the penal standard variable rate. That seems extremely helpful to most borrowers, particularly when they are told that they will not have to pay the redemption penalty that would have applied if they had switched to a different lender. So there is no £5,000 penalty charge, or at least not up front.

The lender kindly offers to roll that on top of the mortgage, so there is no shock to the borrower's financial system. It is a marvellous double whammy, for not only does the lender keep the business locked in for another five years but he charges the premium as if the borrower had left him and ensures that the borrower pays interest on it for the remainder of the mortgage term. As if that were not enough, the lender can offer the same come-on in two years' time when the next fixed rate expires. It appears that in the mortgage game, loyalty rarely pays.

That is what happened to Helen and Andrew Bradshaw. After two years at a fixed rate of 5 per cent., Northern Rock offered them another fixed rate deal at 8.5 per cent. That was in November 1998, when most rates were about 7 to 7.5 per cent. The Bradshaws knew that they would be better off remortgaging with another lender, but thought that they could not afford the £800 premium that they would have to pay. Remortgaging would have saved them £70 to £80 a month, but they did not have the capital to pay the £800 in one go. Of course, they could have rolled that sum up with a new mortgage and been better off. They did not realise that Northern Rock would do that anyway by imposing a redemption charge on their existing deal.

Northern Rock had also insisted that the Bradshaws take out their own Northern Rock home insurance policy. They thought that £600 was expensive for what was after all a modest home, but Northern Rock insisted. What the Bradshaws did not realise was that the following year the policy premium would increase by 20 per cent. to £720, despite their having made no claims. This bundling of other products in with the mortgage is another rip-off. It is a way of concealing the real cost of a mortgage. I am delighted that the Government have announced that they will legislate against such insurance bundling. They cannot do it soon enough.

The calculation of interest annually rather than daily or monthly is another hidden way for lenders to boost their coffers at the home owner's expense. On a mortgage of £150,000 with a rate of 7.5 per cent. over a 25-year mortgage term, the home owner will be charged an extra £3,870 if interest calculations are reviewed annually rather than monthly. The windfall to the lender is even greater if the same home owner pays off a lump sum of £10,000 at the start of the loan. If the interest is calculated on an annual rather than a daily basis, the home owner will pay an extra £48,700 over the 25-year period. Those costs may be hidden, but they are frighteningly real, and I urge the Government to take clear and effective action to stamp out such abuses.

Another similar abuse is when lenders cut savings rates two or three weeks before they cut their mortgage rates, or when the Bank of England base rate rises and they raise their mortgage rates a few weeks before they adjust their savings rates. The strange thing is that they manage never to get it the other way round, even though they claim that this is not a scam. In the last quarter of 1998, the clearing banks—Barclays, HSBC, Lloyds TSB and NatWest—are estimated to have netted a cool £40 million by operating that scam. Regulation should ensure that saving and borrowing rates are changed simultaneously.

[Mr. Barry Gardiner]

I now come to regulation. Many lenders who have contacted me this week have urged that the Government should regulate the mortgage product more thoroughly. Others have urged the Government to regulate more thoroughly the advice given to the home buyer. It is my view that the Government must do both.

The House is aware that discussions have taken place today with Treasury Ministers about the most appropriate way to regulate the mortgage industry. I urge the Government to place the industry within the remit of the Financial Services Authority. Those of us who sat for long months on the Committee considering the Financial Services and Markets Bill are keenly aware that the rationale that lay behind the FSA was to create a single regulator to act as a one-stop shop for the public on financial services. That rationale will have failed if the largest financial contract that most people undertake in their lives remains outside the FSA's remit.

The FSA should become the regulator, and it should urgently review not just the contractual terms of mortgage products to ensure that they are fair and transparent, but the structure of selling these products. When I walk into a car showroom, I do not meet an automobile adviser: I meet a car salesman. When I walk into a department store, I do not meet a soft furnishings adviser: I meet a sales assistant. Why, then, when I walk into the Halifax, Abbey National, the Woolwich, Barclays or NatWest am I suddenly confronted not by a mortgage salesperson but by a mortgage adviser?

That person is not there as my agent, working to secure the best deal available for me. That person is not going to examine my financial position carefully before telling me that, sadly, the company has no suitable product, but, should I care to walk down the road, company Y will no doubt be able to help me. That person is there to maximise his or her company's profit. That person knows that the mortgage that may be better for me may not produce the same commission. How else can we explain the fact that one in three mortgages sold is still sold on an endowment basis?

All mortgage salespeople should be obliged to state clearly that they are not bound to act in clients' best interests, and that their obligation is to their companies—companies that may not even have the product that is most appropriate to a client's needs. They should be obliged to draw attention to the range of products that they do not stock, but that may be available elsewhere. That might introduce some fairness and transparency to the business of selling such an important and onerous contract. It might also draw customers' attention to the fact that there are genuinely independent financial advisers who can provide unbiased advice to help them through the mortgage maze.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to reassure me that regulation of both product and advice will soon be a reality under the Financial Services Authority.

11.47 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) has raised an issue that is vital to many people, and he has done so with great panache and clarity. He has done us all a service because, as he said, the decision to take out a mortgage is one of the biggest decisions that an individual consumer makes. It is also a very personal decision: the object is usually to buy one's home or to make improvements to it.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, people taking out mortgages can be in a very vulnerable position. They are often under both time pressures and economic pressures in their keenness to acquire a new home, and they may make hurried decisions without studying all the small print. I do not think that I have ever studied the small print of any loan that I have taken out; it is often difficult to do so in the prevailing circumstances.

The Government are very concerned about the problems that some consumers have encountered with their mortgages—my hon. Friend listed some of them. As he said, my colleagues in the Treasury are considering whether mortgage advice should be regulated by the Financial Services Authority, and I understand that they will announce the results of their deliberations shortly.

My Department has responsibility for consumer protection issues, so we are also taking action on this important matter. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry met the Council of Mortgage Lenders, major lenders, regulators and consumer groups to discuss mortgage problems. He asked the industry to consider what it could do to address the problems; he also said that he was prepared to use his legislative powers if necessary.

One of the major issues mentioned by my hon. Friend is unfair contract terms, and the question of what is unfair. All businesses—and mortgage lenders are no exception—should deal fairly and equitably with consumers. They should use contracts written in plain language that the average consumer can readily understand. Contracts should also clearly set out all the terms that apply, so that the consumer is not faced with a nasty surprise if, for example, he wants or needs to redeem a mortgage early. The examples that my hon. Friend gave were vivid and very common. The use of legalistic jargon and incomprehensible terms can deprive consumers of their legitimate rights, or, worse, make many consumers feel, mistakenly, that they have no rights at all.

The Office of Fair Trading has recently taken action under the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999 against redemption charges. Such charges are justifiable for some types of mortgage, but the Government have been disturbed to learn of the level of the penalties that some people have been quoted—my hon. Friend mentioned some—to redeem their mortgages. I am also concerned about the complex formulae that some lenders have used to calculate the redemption charge. It is unreasonable to expect ordinary consumers to be able to understand how the formulae will operate if they want to redeem their mortgages, especially as few house buyers will be thinking about the consequences of early redemption when they take out their mortgages.

One of the more extreme examples of such formulae prompted the OFT to contact the lender, using its powers under the regulations. Following the OFT's intervention, the lender concerned—it was NatWest, which received quite a bit of publicity—agreed to cap its redemption charges for fixed-rate mortgages at no more than 5 per cent. of the sum redeemed where the original loan was for five years or less. For loans of five years or more, the cap is 7 per cent. However, those charges are significantly

smaller than what would have been charged using the original redemption formula. I am pleased that the OFT action has resulted in a fairer deal. Where the lender intends to impose a redemption charge, it is crucial that consumers are told about that up front and transparently. I am glad that my hon. Friend emphasised the importance of that initial transparency. In the current market, where many mortgages are redeemed early, consumers need that information to be sure that a mortgage will provide a good deal, both when it is taken out and in the future.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State raised redemption penalties a the mortgage summit that he organised. Lenders have agreed either to quote cash figures for redemption charges in the initial mortgage information or, where that is not possible, to impose a cash cap. That undertaking will ensure that consumers should have a clearer idea of the consequences of early redemption before they choose a mortgage and can take that factor into account when they decide which mortgage is best for them.

My hon. Friend dealt briefly with another important issue: the annual percentage rate and the way in which it is advertised. It is one of the main hooks that cause people either to take mortgages or loans, or to reject them. I am sure that he will recall that, last November, the Government laid regulations that will make it easier for consumers to compare mortgage deals. From April, all lenders will have to use a standard method for calculating APR. They will no longer be able to advertise a mortgage with a low introductory rate—that is the hook—on the misleading basis that that low rate will last throughout the entire period of the loan.

The new regulations will require lenders to take into account the fact that, once the low rate period has ended, the interest rate will change to the lender's standard variable rate. Consumers will be able to feel confident that the advertised APR gives a better reflection of the true cost of the loan throughout the lifetime of that loan. That is an important advance.

My hon. Friend also dealt with the matter of annual versus monthly interest, which is a very important consideration. Many lenders are still using annual interest systems to credit mortgage repayments—so that the outstanding balance on a mortgage is adjusted only once a year, regardless of when repayments are made or their amount. Compared with an equivalent mortgage that charges interest on a daily or monthly basis, a consumer who is charged on an annual interest basis may expect to pay substantial additional interest during the life of the loan. It was another subject that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State raised at the mortgage summit.

Our new APR regulations take account of whatever system the lender uses, so that consumers are able to see which deal is cheapest overall. However, many new entrants to the mortgage market make a virtue of the fact that they do not use annual interest rates. We should like established lenders to move away from that practice, both for new and existing customers. Some of the biggest lenders have already said that, this year, they will be updating their systems. However, even when there will be some delay before they are able to change their systems, we believe that lenders should be looking to give full and immediate value for overpayments as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the tying-in of insurance, which is a worrying trend. Some consumers who want to get the best mortgage deal from a particular lender have to buy tied home or other insurance—a practice that I have encountered in dealing with another aspect of my portfolio, the travel industry. Many people who want to obtain good package travel or holiday deal are expected to buy insurance that is often delivered at sky-high prices.

In the mortgage market, the price of compulsory insurance does not have to be competitive because the borrower cannot shop around for the best deal. Currently, it seems that relatively few lenders require the purchase of tied insurance, but we are concerned that the practice could become more widespread. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently announced that legislation will be introduced at the earliest possible opportunity to make it illegal to force consumers to take out certain insurance policies linked to a mortgage. We intend to publish a consultation paper on the matter in the spring, and legislation will follow.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will be aware that there have been regulations protecting consumers against unfair terms since 1994. However, in October 1999 the Government changed the law to enable more organisations to take action against businesses that use unfair terms in their standard contracts with consumers. I was very keen on that initiative.

Since the beginning of October, the Consumers Association—which is one of the named organisations—the statutory industry regulators and local authority trading standards officers—who are the stalwarts of consumer protection—have had the power to apply for court injunctions to prevent the continued use of unfair contract terms. It is a very important initiative, and the Consumers Association has not only signed up to it, but is very keen to be seen as the sponsoring agency in relation to the mortgage sector.

I expect formal court action to be very rare. The vast majority of complaints that the OFT has investigated since the regulations came into force have resulted in a negotiated change to the unfair term. I fully expect—and would encourage—the process of resolution to be by informal means, rather than by court action. As my hon. Friend said, much will depend on the action of the FSA.

The mortgage summit held at the DTI has demonstrated a willingness by the Government, lenders and consumer groups to address those major mortgage problems. Ministers and officials will be holding further meetings in the near future to ensure that they are overcome. I wholeheartedly support the work currently being done to remove unfair terms from mortgage contracts.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue—on which, although we are making progress, much is left to be done. There are very good lenders out there, offering very good products and very good services, and those best examples must be replicated everywhere possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Thursday 13 January 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

ALLIANCE & LEICESTER PLC (GROUP REORGANISATION) BILL *[Lords].*

Considered; to be read the Third time.

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Pig Industry

1. **Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith** (Wealden): What support he will give to pig farmers seeking compensation for the costs of BSE-related food safety measures. [103771]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): My overall priority is to remove BSE from the cattle herd in order to maintain confidence in the whole of British agriculture. I recognise, as the previous Government did, that pursuing that policy imposes additional costs on the British livestock industry, including the pig industry. I have twice asked the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee to look at the issues, particularly as they apply to the pig industry.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that way back on 20 October he said:

"The problem requires a further considered response from the Government. I am working very hard on it, and I hope to have something new and comprehensive to tell the House in a matter of days."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1999; Vol. 336, c. 465.]

Nothing has happened. On 9 November, he told the Select Committee on Agriculture that he was "incredibly sympathetic" on the issue. He assured the Committee:

"I want to explore everything the Government can do that will help".

Nothing has happened. Why does not the right hon. Gentleman take immediate action, as many, including the National Pig Association, have recommended, and respond to the statement and the letter from the Agriculture Commissioner—of which I have a copy—by opening negotiations? The Commissioner has offered his help, but nothing has happened on that.

Mr. Brown: My officials are in touch with the Commission and we are exploring those matters. It is not true to say that nothing has happened. Together with the Meat and Livestock Commission, I went back to SEAC to see whether there was some way of achieving a commercial value of the meat and bonemeal for the industry consistent with the need for public protection measures. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, at the end of December the advisory committee said, disappointingly from the industry's point of view, that it was not willing to recommend that.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): Like all hon. Members, I recognise the desperate plight of the pig industry. Is my right hon. Friend satisfied with the response to his efforts to increase awareness of the higher pig production welfare standards in this country? Like the measures that relate to BSE, those higher standards inevitably increase UK production costs. Or do people who are prepared to write to Members of Parliament asking them to vote for higher welfare standards then prefer to buy cheap imports when the laws are passed?

Mr. Brown: I am not satisfied that we are doing enough to secure the premium that the industry ought to be able to gain in the marketplace. I have secured some extra money for marketing initiatives and made it clear that the pig sector has a first call on it. I hope that it will be possible this year to do more to explain to consumers the advantages of UK production methods—not just the fact that the process is free of meat and bonemeal, but that the pigs are raised free of stall and tether systems. Those are the animal welfare standards that our constituents asked us to vote for back in 1991.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that British pig farmers are unique in facing extra costs because of the BSE crisis? They are going out of production while their international competitors stay in production. When the market picks up, yet another British industry will no longer exist to supply it. Will he assure the industry that if any way can be found in Europe to see our farmers through the crisis by helping with their BSE costs, he and the Treasury will find the money?

Mr. Brown: As I said in my answer to the initial question, I acknowledge, as the previous Government did, that this country's public safety measures impose extra costs on the livestock industry. Those costs are not confined to the cattle sector, but impact on the pig sector. The Government have never sought to disguise the fact that the sector is in crisis. I have tried to devise workable measures that will help to get the industry through. We have discussed a range of measures in the House. I intend to continue with my efforts.

Mrs. Janet Dean (Burton): Many people would choose to buy British if they could be sure that the labelling was correct. What progress is being made to ensure that labelling accurately reflects the country of origin?

Mr. Brown: As the House will know, I have put the trading standards guidelines issued by Department out to consultation. We have the results of that consultation and I hope to have more to say about that within a matter of days. My hon. Friend is right. If we are asking consumers to support the industry, they must have clear and accurate information.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): The Minister of Agriculture in the Republic of Ireland recently announced £1 million of European state aid to pig farmers there, particularly relating to the border counties. What does the Minister know about that? If the Republic of Ireland can get state aid from the European Union for its pig farmers, why cannot he get it for our pig farmers in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Brown: I am meeting my counterpart, Joe Walsh, this month to discuss these and other issues on which we have a shared interest, but I suspect that Minister Walsh will say that the United Kingdom Government paid out aid following the fire in Northern Ireland and that the industry in southern Ireland is claiming to be similarly affected. I suspect that that will be his reply, but I await discussions with the Minister.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware that as pig farmers are going out of business in the United Kingdom, an increasing number of people are going into the pork industry elsewhere in the EU. Given the strength of the pound, would not this be a good time for us to subsidise pig feed as the cost of grain is a significant factor due to the health and welfare standards that have rightly been introduced? Would not subsidising the cost of feed be a good way of helping the industry at this time?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there are unique features to the crisis in the United Kingdom, but the crisis itself is not unique to the United Kingdom. The EU market is oversupplied and there are difficulties in the pig sector in the United States and eastern Europe. The problem is not confined to the EU. I cannot unilaterally introduce specific state aids just for the United Kingdom as that would breach the agreement that we have made in the EU.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): The Minister is presiding over the biggest fall in the United Kingdom pig herd and the largest number of job losses in pig farming in any recent period. It took him a year even to issue a consultation document about guidance on labelling; it took him four months and a great deal of prodding by the Conservatives—*[Interruption.]* The Minister seems to find it amusing,—before he troubled to carry out his promise to the House to write to public authorities urging them to make their pig meat purchases from sources which meet UK standards. He misled the House, or very nearly, on that matter—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Brown: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The charge of misleading the House is a very serious one. I have not misled the House.

Madam Speaker: Exactly. I am about to ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw that remark.

Mr. Yeo: I withdraw the charge of misleading the House. Let me recount the facts. On 1 July the Minister told the House that he would have letters on his desk ready to go out to public authorities. When Conservative Members questioned him four months later, those letters had not been sent. I am happy to put those facts on the record now, but the question is how many more hundreds or thousands of pig farmers will lose their businesses before the Minister offers any practical steps to meet the £5 a pig in extra costs that have been imposed on farmers for public health reasons.

Mr. Brown: The last Conservative Government, who introduced the meat and bonemeal regulations, did not meet the costs either. In a previous debate on the matter—this is much trawled ground—when I asked the hon. Gentleman why not, he said that the economic circumstances were different. Of course that answer ruined any case that we might make to the Commission as, on the hon. Gentleman's own definition, it would be a case for economic aid. The Commission would have to reject any such request.

The hon. Gentleman is doing down the British pig farmers. He referred to the letters to local authorities. They were part of a co-ordinated campaign with the industry that we agreed to launch in the autumn rather than in the summer when people would be away and the campaign would become unfocused. That has been explained to the House before. The Conservatives were in government for 18 years. None of the measures that they urge upon me now was put into practice when they were in government.

HLCA

2. **Mr. Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot): What assessment he has made of the impact of proposed changes to the hill livestock compensatory allowances on hill farmers' incomes. [103772]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): There will be some changes in support between producers but the impact will vary according to their individual circumstances. The changes are being introduced gradually so that producers have time to adjust, but we believe they are part of the positive agricultural and rural development strategy outlined by my right hon. Friend the Minister in his statement to the House on 7 December 1999.

Mr. Howarth: I am sure that the Minister will recognise that Aldershot is not over-endowed with hills,

let alone hill farmers, but my family have farmed the hills of the borders of Scotland for centuries. Is the Minister aware of the serious crisis that is affecting hill farmers throughout the United Kingdom? Their incomes are forecast to fall to a mere £2,000 and only 15 per cent. of hill farmers are aged under 40. The industry has also been hit severely by the huge rises in petrol and diesel taxes. Will she confirm that the Government will not reduce the level of financial support to those custodians of our remote rural heritage until such time as average incomes have returned to acceptable and adequate levels? If so, will she set out what she considers those levels to be?

Ms Quin: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's interest in the important question of hill farming, despite the fact that hill farmers are not numerous in Aldershot. I hope that he will recognise that the Government have shown commitment to hill farming through the measures that we have taken. Indeed, the maintenance of the £60 million increase in the hill livestock compensatory allowance this year is a clear example. The measures that we have announced recognise the environmental and social role that hill farming plays in our countryside as well as the important question of the livelihoods of hill farmers.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): What new research has my right hon. Friend initiated into the future of the communities on the upper slopes? Does she acknowledge the great difficulties in growing meat on those hill sides, which are cold, wet and sour, and where family farms are now at considerable risk? Does she agree that the greater problem is the very communities on the uplands, not least in Wales? What new initiatives can be taken, bearing in mind that it is obvious that the Ministry wishes to help?

Ms Quin: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. We have pursued the issue in several ways—partly by direct support and partly through the consultation that the Ministry undertook on the future of the hill farming sector and payments to hill farmers. We believe that the proposals that we made strike a good balance between economic and environmental considerations and we are aware that great concern is felt throughout the House, my right hon. Friend's constituency and the country that we get those considerations right.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister accept that her consultation paper was a tribute to the literacy of British farmers? Does she agree that the amount available for the scheme in England is falling from £42 million to £27 million? Does she further agree that if she really wants to gain environmental benefits from the scheme it will eventually have to be differentiated according to land cover and the carrying capacity of the land? Otherwise, one flat rate scheme will simply be replaced by another and the Minister's aims will not be delivered.

Ms Quin: The latter point is a serious and important one, and I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we are well aware of those considerations. The consultation process was worth while because of the responses that we received. Indeed, the written consultation was only part of the process, because we also had consultations about the implementation of Agenda 2000 generally in meetings throughout the country with hill farmers and others. We are determined to keep that dialogue going. What is being proposed is only one element of the support for hill farming. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, most of the subsidy that goes to hill farmers will continue as livestock payments.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the cost to taxpayers in direct payments to hill farmers is some £700 million a year? Despite that sum, hill farmers are still in a difficult situation. Is not it time that we looked again at the way in which supporting hill farmers has not been as helpful as we would have expected and hoped it to be and that we tried to make that support more effective?

Ms Quin: I can confirm the figure that my hon. Friend quoted, which shows that hill farmers receive a large amount of financial support. However, I should also like to commend to the House the direction in which Government policy is moving. In the negotiations in which we have taken part we have achieved some success in changing the thrust of common agricultural policy support, away from direct payments and towards more general rural development. Our proposals in relation to the UK will help hill farming change the basis of its finance and support in the future.

However, given the severity of the current depression in agriculture, we must accept that such measures must be introduced gradually to avoid tremendous disruption.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The Government are very proud of their introduction of the national minimum wage, but most hill farmers earn nothing like that amount. They farm some of the most difficult areas of our countryside, which would be a lot poorer without their stewardship. They ask me what their future will be: how would the Minister respond to that question?

Ms Quin: The answer is that the Government are providing substantial levels of support for such farmers, as the hon. Gentleman knows as well as I. We are delighted to have introduced the national minimum wage. The Conservative party opposed that, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman is a dissident on the issue. However, we have also supported the continuation of minimum arrangements for agricultural workers.

Organic Farming

3. **Mr. Alan Simpson** (Nottingham, South): What plans he has to increase support for organic farm conversion. [103773]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): On 7 December 1999, my right hon. Friend the Minister announced the Government's plans for spending on the rural development programme for England. Under these plans, £140 million will be available over the life of the programme for aid for conversion to organic farming.

Mr. Simpson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on taking organic farming seriously—something that the previous Conservative did not do in their 18-year dynasty of

agricultural disasters. However, will he confirm that the legacy of neglect from those years still leaves the UK with less than 1.5 per cent. of its agricultural land devoted to organic farming production? That is less than half the European average, in terms of investment in organic farming.

The Welsh Assembly has set a target of achieving 10 per cent. organic production by 2005. The Danish Government have set a target of trebling organic farming production by the same date, and of having 50 per cent. of all agricultural production coming from organic farms by 2010. In Austria, 10 per cent. of agricultural production already is organic, and the country plans to take that level to 50 per cent. in some sectors within a couple of years.

Will the Minister come back to the House and set targets for organic farm production in the UK so that we will be back among the best in Europe, rather than just one of the rest?

Mr. Morley: The latest figures show that 3 per cent. of land has been converted to organic farming. Since last April, the area of such land has increased by 400 per cent. In the five years up to last April, only 400 farmers undertook that conversion, but since last April, 1,200 have done so. That shows the depth of the Government's commitment to organic farming.

My hon. Friend asked about targets. Targets can be useful in terms of fixing aspirations and underlining commitment, and the Government have studied the matter carefully. However, we want to expand the organic sector only to the extent that the market will accept. If targets are set too high—if production is driven on beyond what the market can stand—the market can be damaged. If they are set too low, there is no incentive for continued expansion.

We consider that we should expand organic farming in an open-ended way, as far as the market will allow. That huge boost of £140 million in the rural development programme will allow us to do that.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that £140 million is nothing like enough? Given the increased demand in this country for organic food, and the fact that the high prices militate against poorer people who are excluded from buying these products at a time when more and more people are concerned about additives, does not the hon. Gentleman think that he should reassess the budget and support for organic farmers? The Government must recognise that times have changed and that more money should be made available.

Mr. Morley: We are currently reviewing the organic sector and the rates of payment. However, I remind Opposition Members that the Government have doubled the rates of conversion payment, which is why there has been a massive increase in organic conversion. We see this as the beginning, not the end. This substantial amount of money allows great expansion. We will keep the situation under review.

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): May I congratulate my hon. Friend on the very large increase in money for conversion? But may I remind him that the money that the Government give to research and development in organic farming is just one third of the money given to research in genetic engineering in agriculture? Given the huge demand for organic food in recent times, particularly by people who wish to avoid eating genetically modified organisms, will my hon. Friend consider raising that research and development budget to reflect the concerns of consumers and give a very much needed boost to British agriculture?

Mr. Morley: I know that my hon. Friend has been very active in promoting the organic sector. However, I must correct her on one point: the actual budget for genetic research is very similar to that for organic research. I think that my hon. Friend is confusing that with the biotechnology budget, which covers issues such as research into the effects of pesticides on food.

We have doubled the budget as part of our commitment to the organic sector. It is important to maintain not just support for research and development but practical advice to the organic information helpline. We shall be considering those issues in the current review.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): In the light of the Minister's plans to support organic farming, would he consider protecting organic farmers from cross-pollination from GM crops? Is he aware of today's independent report from the National Pollen Research Unit, which indicates that there is a high risk of cross-pollination between source and recipient fields for as much as up to 4 km? Farmers converting to organic production need protection as well as aid. In advance of the spring planting, will the Minister take action to increase the very inadequate isolation distances between such fields?

Mr. Morley: The separation distances between organic and GM crops are based on current best practice, which has been in place for many years. The Government are funding detailed research on cross-pollination and potential cross-contamination. The research is being carried out by a consortium led by the Institute for Terrestrial Ecology. It is looking into the whole issue, including aspects such as headlands and field margins. Wildlife will also be sampled, including vascular plants, arthropods and, on the ground, so will plants, caterpillars, slugs, snails, bees, butterflies, seed banks and earthworms.

A great deal of research is being carried out into GM and organic crops. If it demonstrates that the present separation differences which, as I said, are based on established practice, are inadequate, there will be changes to the guidelines.

World Trade

5. **Mr. Peter Luff** (Mid-Worcestershire): If he will make a statement on the progress in talks to liberalise world trade in agricultural products. [103776]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Negotiations on the further liberalisation of agricultural trade were mandated by the 1994 World Trade Organisation agreement on agriculture. The negotiations will go ahead this year in spite of the suspension in Seattle of talks on a wider round of trade

negotiations. The agricultural negotiations are based on article 20 of the agreement on agriculture, which follows the Uruguay round.

Mr. Luff: I thank the Minister for that helpful clarification. Does he agree that trade liberalisation poses many challenges and threats, and offers many opportunities to United Kingdom food and farming industries? That is why the Agriculture Committee has made it one of its major subjects of inquiry in this Session. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is a major threat to UK animal welfare standards? Will he give the House a reassurance that he will put at the centre of his negotiating strategy the concerns of British farmers who wish to maintain high standards of animal welfare, but risk being undercut by cheaper imports from countries with much lower standards?

Mr. Brown: As the hon. Gentleman is the Chairman of the Select Committee on Agriculture, he will know that I take animal welfare issues very seriously indeed. I have raised the point that he made at the Council of Ministers—formally, on behalf of the UK Government, and separately, in the margins, with the Commission and with other Ministers. There is a view among EU Ministers that animal welfare issues are important, but that we must protect the EU from exporting its industries. As we set higher standards internally, we must put our industries at a competitive advantage. The task for Ministers is to find a way of preserving the animal welfare polices for which we strive and of improving them, but to do so in a non-trade distorting manner.

Mr. Ian Cawsey (Brigg and Goole): When my right hon. Friend holds negotiations on the world trade in agricultural products, will he push for a change in the classification of livestock from agricultural products to sentient beings—as has already been done in the EU? If that change were adopted worldwide, it would not only be a tremendous boost for British farmers, but would be widely supported throughout the whole country.

Mr. Brown: There are several possible ways forward. The important point is to achieve our objectives and to do so in a non-trade distorting way. The danger for the EU is that we increase standards within the EU, but find that we have exported our industries. That would be a defeat for animal welfare as well as for farmers. We are trying to avoid that.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): The right hon. Gentleman will be fully aware that when animal welfare considerations have been raised at previous World Trade Organisation discussions, they have always eventually been used as a trade-off for issues that other people regard as more important. Will he give the House an absolute assurance that animal welfare—to UK standards—is at the top of his agenda, and that it will not be used merely as a bargaining chip for other issues?

Mr. Brown: Animal welfare is an important—indeed integral—part of the UK's agenda for these complex discussions on agricultural reform and trade liberalisations; it most certainly is not a bargaining chip for other pieces of the negotiation.

Food Standards Agency (EU)

6. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): If he has been consulted on the European Commission's proposals for a food standards agency; and if he will make a statement. [103777]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): The European Commission published a White Paper on food safety yesterday, outlining proposals for such a body. The Government support the idea in principle, and will consider the detailed proposals in the White Paper carefully.

Mr. Prentice: That is good. However, over recent years we have all been sickened by stomach churning tales of sewage in animal feedstuffs, dioxins in meat in Belgium, antibiotic growth promoters, salmonella, listeria and BSE—what a catalogue. Following yesterday's announcement, there are suggestions in the press that this new European food standards agency is neither fish nor fowl—*[Interruption.]* A louder groan please. But seriously, what will be the relationship between the European food standards agency and the domestic Food Standards Agency? Would the Government prefer the European agency to have regulatory powers, or simply to be advisory?

Ms Quin: We need to ensure that European decisions and our national safeguards are complementary. We also need a system whereby European rules—once agreed by all member states—are properly implemented. In introducing his proposals yesterday, Commissioner Byrne expressed confidence that they would deliver a more effective system both as regards consumer confidence and for the operation of the EU market where EU rules had clearly been agreed. We welcome those assurances, but as more detailed proposals will be submitted, which will be discussed by national Governments as well as by the European institutions, it will be important to ensure that the detail is correct.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Yesterday's announcement presages a European food authority. Can the Minister confirm that the initial proposals envisage the appointment of 150 officials in the short term, rising to a total of 600, and that one of their tasks will be to produce something like 84 additional legislative measures, including a new hygiene directive? Does the Minister accept that it is most likely that all of that new legislation from Europe will override national legislation? Is not this another instance of competence passing from this House to the European Community?

Was the launch of our own Food Standards Agency yesterday deliberately timed to coincide with the White Paper launched in Brussels yesterday? Does this explain the acceleration of the progress of the Food Standards Bill through the last Session of Parliament? Is there—

Madam Speaker: Order. I think that those are enough questions to be going on with.

Ms Quin: The hon. Gentleman's comments have left me mystified by the Opposition's policy. Is it a policy of allowing each country to do what it wants, which seems

to be a recipe for chaos? Or is it one of seeking to have an effective system in the internal market, which the Opposition tell us they support? What the hon. Gentleman says is at enormous variance with what the Conservative party's agriculture spokesmen in the European Parliament seem to be saying. They want a bigger European Union body, not a smaller one.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the improvement of food standards across Europe is of great importance to my constituents, who are concerned about the safety of food coming into this country? Will she assure me that our Food Standards Agency will play an important role in ensuring that the standards across Europe—with or without its own agency—will be improved? I welcome the appointment of Sir John Krebs, as having such an eminent scientist at the head of our FSA will be extremely important in driving up standards across Europe, as well as at home.

Ms Quin: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments, particularly the latter ones. We believe that the appointment of Sir John Krebs—and the rest of the governing body of the FSA—is good news. There is a good balance, and there are people with excellent qualifications to ensure a successful start to the FSA. I recognise the concerns of my hon. Friend's constituents, and I can assure her and the House that we have been proactive in this respect. We have worked with the Commission and given it information about our work on food safety and on the way in which the Government have implemented our manifesto pledge on setting up our own Food Standards Agency.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): At a time when the European Commission cannot even make the single market rules apply to France on the issue of British beef exports, why does the Minister believe that it is sensible to establish a huge new costly and bureaucratic agency, whose advice would no doubt be followed meticulously in Britain at great cost to British producers, but would be ignored by many producers abroad—and thus would reinforce the unlevel playing field that is already doing so much damage to British industry?

Ms Quin: Again, the hon. Gentleman's comments seem to be completely at variance with what Conservative MEPs are saying. They say that they want a bigger and, presumably, more expensive body. We want a system whereby countries which have accepted rules actually respect and implement them. In that respect, I very much welcome some of the ideas in the Commission's White Paper, which will be looked at in detail. For example, there is a proposal that the European Commission be empowered to fine members for breaching EU food standards, without having to wait for a court ruling. That is particularly relevant, given our present dispute with the French.

Farm Businesses

7. **Mr. Brian White** (Milton Keynes, North-East): What action he is taking to assist in the development of economically viable farm businesses. [103778]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): As I announced in the House on 7 December 1999, I am redirecting some farming support and the Government are providing new funding to provide more help for farmers to modernise, to diversify and to farm in a more environmentally beneficial way. I am also providing support for improved marketing. I am studying the reports of the three working groups that I set up to review regulatory burdens.

Mr. White: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the rural development plan—and, in particular, the extra money that he has secured from the Treasury—has been widely welcomed. Does he accept that the knee-jerk reaction of the Opposition in calling for more subsidies and fewer taxes is not the way forward? Will he require, under the forthcoming rural White Paper, organisations such as regional development agencies, planning authorities and so on to pay more heed to farmers' voices?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—the way forward for British agriculture is to get closer to the marketplace. It should consider the demand side rather than try to supplement the supply side of the common agricultural policy.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The right hon. Gentleman will know that I, like many Members, have hundreds of upland farmers in my constituency whose businesses are no longer viable. What positive advice and assistance can he give such farmers in the midst of this crisis? If he has none, is not it time for him to step aside and make way for a Minister who will take the crisis seriously?

Mr. Brown: In view of the substantial amount of support that I have announced since I became the Minister responsible for those who farm less-favoured areas, the hon. Gentleman's remarks are unfair and unworthy. The truth is that there is a great deal in the rural development plan for hill farmers. They should proportionately be the beneficiaries of what has been announced.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): The rural development plan is most welcome in country areas, such as those that I and my colleagues represent. Is my right hon. Friend optimistic that it will herald the end of the annual emergency aid cycle of packages to farmers and replace that with sustainable support that will produce a viable and profitable method of agriculture?

Mr. Brown: It is my objective to get away from emergency aid packages that consider the supply side—they have been the only way of providing immediate assistance to the sector—and to move towards sustainable policies that will give the industry support in a way that is decoupled from production and less vulnerable to the short-term effects of the marketplace. That is the thinking behind the rural development measure.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I want to return to consideration of the pig industry, which is one of the least economically viable of all agricultural industries. Twice in his earlier comments, the Minister said that the BSE controls on pigs were to do with public protection and public safety. Those were his words, and

I think that that will be proven in *Hansard*. Therefore, will he explain the difference between a British pig farmer who, for public safety, suffers innocently from those BSE controls but receives no support from the European Union or the Government, and a Belgian pig farmer who suffered equally innocently from the dioxin controls but received compensation from the EU?

Rather than blaming the Opposition for what we did or did not do in government, will the Minister turn his concern into action, go to the Commission—not send an official—and make the case that British pig farmers should be compensated for those public safety controls?

Mr. Brown: If the hon. Gentleman believes so passionately in the case that he has just put, why did not his Government do precisely that when the regulations were introduced? *[Interruption.]* It is no good Opposition Members shouting that that is not the question—it is precisely the question that the Commission would ask me if we were to make such a request. In speaking on behalf of the Conservative party, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) said that it viewed such an intervention as economic aid. That would rule out the Commission giving permission for it.

Common Fisheries Policy

8. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What progress he has made in securing the support of his European counterparts for the reform of the common fisheries policy. [103780]

9. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster** (Hastings and Rye): What steps he is taking to reform the common fisheries policy. [103781]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Government will continue to take every opportunity to secure improvements to the common fisheries policy, to make it a more effective instrument for conserving fish stocks while securing the best possible conditions for the UK industry.

Given the recent tragic news, I am sure that the whole House will join me when I express my sincere condolences to the family and friends of the crew of the Solway Harvester, which was recently lost in the Irish sea.

Dr. Lewis: I am sure that the whole House endorses what the Minister has just said about the tragedy of the Solway Harvester.

In the Minister's negotiations with his European colleagues about the common fisheries policy, the Government do not seem to have had much success on the issue of landing sizes, for which restrictions on 11 categories of fish have recently been removed. Fish in eight of those categories have a good chance of survival if they are returned to the sea. Will not the removal of restrictions have a seriously damaging effect on future fish stocks?

Mr. Morley: Minimum landing sizes are an important issue, but they must be associated with technical conservation measures. The hon. Gentleman is quite wrong—we reversed the minimum landing size reduction on plaice, for example, and we negotiated with other European countries to make it possible to do that unilaterally if the Commission did not agree.

Mr. Foster: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the efforts that he made at the Fisheries Council because he did an extremely good job in a difficult situation. Fishermen in Hastings and Rye are in any case natural conservationists and they acknowledge and accept the need for some reductions. How will my hon. Friend make sure that other nation states are equally effective in enforcing the new provisions?

Mr. Morley: When I met fishermen from my hon. Friend's constituency they made several important points about conservation, which influenced the recent consultation on the inshore sector, and which we have extended to the whole UK sector. To ensure that there is equal enforcement, the new control measures introduced by the European Union will, for the first time, ensure that the same standards of enforcement and control are applied across all member states, and there is an element of independent inspection by the Commission itself to make sure that that is the case.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. It is very disappointing that in three quarters of an hour we have reached only eight questions. I am sure that many Back Benchers as well as Front Benchers are very disappointed, too. I am sorry that I have not been able to call many of the hon. Members who have been rising, wanting to speak on most of the issues. I hope that we can make better progress, not only at Agriculture questions, but at all questions, and that questions as well as answers are not as long as they are now tending to be.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

Rights of Access

27. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on rights of access to prosecuting lawyers by victims of crime. [R] [103802]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): There are professional rules of conduct that govern how much communication a prosecution advocate can have with a witness in a criminal case. In some circumstances, however, direct contact between the victim and the prosecutor is both important and necessary either before or after the trial. The Crown Prosecution Service and the Law Officers are committed to ensuring that direct contact does take place in appropriate circumstances.

Dr. Lewis: I declare an interest because I was a witness in a case in which the conditions were skewed greatly toward the defendant because he had direct access to his lawyers, whereas I, as the alleged victim, had little or no access to the lawyers bringing the prosecution case. If the Solicitor-General is saying that he is satisfied with the present situation, I must tell him that many victims of

crime are not. Will he consider more closely ensuring access by victims of crime to the lawyers who are supposed to be bringing the prosecution, with a view to evening up that unjust imbalance?

The Solicitor-General: The House will know that we take very seriously the position of victims, and we are considering a range of measures to improve that. There has been extensive discussion with the hon. Gentleman, who was the subject of untrue and scurrilous allegations. A prosecution was undertaken, but unfortunately that failed for technical reasons on appeal. I explained in my answer, and it has been explained to the hon. Gentleman, that the prosecutor is acting not for the victim, but in the public interest. There has to be some access to those lawyers, but the situation is not the same as with defence counsel, who represent a particular person.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) has a good point. One way to open a channel of communication with victims would be through the use of victim impact statements. If we could avoid the excesses of the American system of using statements, they would be a valuable tool to enable the courts and prosecutors to understand the victims' point of view and the effect of the crime on them. Are any discussions taking place to try to introduce a reasonable system for using victim impact statements in British courts?

The Solicitor-General: The Home Office is considering a range of measures, including victim impact statements. There has been a pilot project and a report was produced shortly before Christmas. There are difficulties, but they are not insuperable. The Home Office is considering those and other measures.

European Convention on Human Rights

28. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): When *(a)* he and *(b)* the Attorney-General last met the Secretary of State for the Home Department to discuss the implementation of the European convention on human rights. [103803]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The Attorney-General and I regularly meet the Home Secretary and Home Office Ministers to discuss matters of common interest, including human rights. In addition, I am a member of the human rights task force, which is chaired by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), and which includes representatives from a range of human rights groups.

Mr. Mackinlay: Will my hon. and learned Friend counsel my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that there is a serious deficiency in our statute law in relation to our obligations under the European convention on human rights? European judges will note that the Crown has been reminded of this by the British legislature. We have no public interest defence under the Official Secrets Act 1989. No doubt the Ponting jury took account of that.

The French courts, recently and embarrassingly for the United Kingdom, declined to meet our extradition requests in relation to David Shayler. The Foreign Office is embarrassed when trying to argue on behalf of, for example, people in the Russian Federation who have leaked information about the deterioration of nuclear weapons and nuclear plants. It is time that we remedied the omission by ensuring that there are adequate defence opportunities when charges are made under the Official Secrets Act.

The Solicitor-General: The Human Rights Act 1998 does not amend the Official Secrets Act 1989. My hon. Friend will know that all legislation, including the Official Secrets Act, must be interpreted in conformity with the Human Rights Act. In addition, all public authorities, including the security services, must act in conformity with that Act. In any prosecution, including one under the Official Secrets Act, the defendant can raise a human rights point. That three-pronged attack does not exactly address my hon. Friend's concern, but it may give him some comfort.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): In the interests of open government, will the Solicitor-General explain to the House the process adopted by the Government before a statement of compatibility with the convention is added to a Bill?

The Solicitor-General: Every Minister must sign a certificate and every Minister receives detailed advice from his or her lawyers. In some cases, my Department will be involved. There will be a detailed statement, which will go to the Cabinet Committee on Legislation. The section 19 statement is backed by a detailed analysis undertaken by Government officials.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does not the European convention on human rights give the right to parents to ensure that their children can be educated in accordance with the philosophical convictions of those parents? Might not the convention prove an invaluable tool and defence mechanism in the event that the malicious and stupid regulations of the Government were to lead to the abolition of a single grammar school?

The Solicitor-General: Some of the hon. Gentleman's comments are tendentious—*[Interruption.]* In fact, all of them are. He is right to say that parents have a right to educate their children as they wish. However, there is a range of other rights as well, all of which are important.

CPS

29. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What measures are being taken to ensure that the views of the Crown Prosecution Service at all levels are taken into account as the reforms of the CPS are implemented. [103804]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): Proper consultation with all staff is essential for the reform programme. The CPS is approaching that in an open and inclusive way. The trade unions have been consulted throughout and the membership of the working groups steering the reforms in the CPS has been drawn widely from across the service. The CPS has also set up a

sounding-board network, which is designed to provide an additional regular forum for staff at all levels to inform and monitor the reforms.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for that answer. When I visited the CPS office in Canterbury before the reforms were announced, I found the staff there very much looking forward to the reforms and wanting to be closely involved in making them work. Will my hon. and learned Friend assure me that senior CPS staff will be visiting local area offices and talking to staff at all levels to receive their feedback? Will he also assure me that trade unionists in local branches will be involved? Will there be anything more formal and objective than the sounding board appears to be, which will ensure that the views of all staff are taken into account?

The Solicitor-General: I thank my hon. Friend for visiting his local office. I received a detailed report of that visit, which was obviously useful. More detailed work than I specified in the initial answer is being done. A survey and stress audit among all members of staff is to be carried out. The trade unions are closely involved—for example, trade union representatives sit on the equality committee and the working group on race. There is a regular programme of visits by managers, and the Attorney-General and I also have a regular system of visiting all offices around the country.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): One of the matters that the Solicitor-General will no doubt want to take into account is the current and future budget of the Crown Prosecution Service. How much will the CPS have spent on its own behalf and on behalf of Spain in the Pinochet case, and what proportion of the CPS's annual budget does that sum represent?

The Solicitor-General: I cannot give the detailed figures, but I shall write to the hon. and learned Gentleman. Questions have been answered on the matter. As a result of a decision of the divisional court, the arrangement in this country is that the CPS acts as the agent of a foreign state—in the case that the hon. and learned Gentleman raised, Spain—and accepts instructions, as does any lawyer from a client. That arrangement was laid down by the divisional court. Some may question that policy, but that is the law. I will come back to the hon. and learned Gentleman with the detailed response to his inquiries.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): My own visit to the local Crown Prosecution Service left me less than overwhelmed by the support provided by information technology. Will my hon. and learned Friend ensure that efficient IT, which any modernised prosecution service needs, will be available to the CPS?

The Solicitor-General: Again, I commend my hon. Friend for visiting his local CPS. IT is important. The CPS does not have sufficient IT. At a previous Question Time, I said that under the modernisation programme from the Treasury, the CPS has £12 million to introduce IT. That will be done in the near future. There is also a more detailed programme to ensure that the criminal justice system is joined-up, IT-wise, so that the police can communicate with the prosecutors, the courts and so on.

30. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): What measures his Department uses to monitor the performance of the Crown Prosecution Service in terms of cases taken forward for prosecution. [103805]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The performance of the Crown Prosecution Service is monitored against a range of measures. Those include the proportion of dismissals—no case to answer—in magistrates courts and non-jury acquittals in the Crown court, where the outcome is attributable to failure in the review process. Information on the number and proportion of cases resulting in an adverse outcome, and on the reason for that result, is collected by the CPS and is used to identify areas requiring improvement.

Mr. O'Brien: I listened carefully to the Solicitor-General's answer and to the answers he has given previously, which have been of a general nature. What practical steps are being taken specifically to liaise with the victims of crime and to keep them informed of the progress of cases? How about a weekly or fortnightly telephone call, e-mail or letter? That contact should be measured, so that victims of crime can monitor how matters are progressing from their point of view.

The Solicitor-General: I can tell the House that we are piloting recommendations made in the Macpherson and the Glidewell reports that the CPS should be the contact with the victim. At present, the police are the contact. That means that sometimes messages may be garbled. We are working towards a system where the prosecutors will be the point of contact with victims, which should greatly improve the arrangements to which the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) referred earlier.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Can the Solicitor-General examine the processes that resulted in the possibly malicious prosecution of two people in Cambridge—known as the Cambridge Two—

Madam Speaker: Order. The case is subject to appeal and is therefore sub judice.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): May I ask the Leader of the House if she would be kind enough to announce the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 17 JANUARY—Opposition Day [2nd Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate on "Meeting the Needs of Pensioners" followed by a debate entitled "Protecting Post Office Services". Both motions will arise in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

TUESDAY 18 JANUARY—Opposition Day [3rd Allotted Day].

Until about 7 o'clock, there will be a debate entitled "The Government's Mismanagement of Health Care in the United Kingdom" followed by a debate entitled "The Rising Cost and Reduced Accountability of Central Government". Both debates will arise on Opposition motions. They will be followed by a motion to approve the Administration Committee Report on the Line of Route.

WEDNESDAY 19 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Representation of the People Bill.

Second Reading of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill.

Second Reading of the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill.

THURSDAY 20 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Electronic Communications Bill.

Debate on the Braithwaite Report on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 21 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 24 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Disqualifications Bill.

The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

TUESDAY 25 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Disqualifications Bill.

WEDNESDAY 26 JANUARY—Progress of remaining stages of the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

THURSDAY 27 JANUARY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

FRIDAY 28 JANUARY—The first day of debating private Members' Bills.

It may be convenient for the House to know that the Easter recess will take place the week after Easter rather than the previous week.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving us the business for next week and the following week. I also wish her a happy new year. I thank her for giving us an indication of the date of the Easter recess. Although we do not ask for a week off in February, can she state whether there will be such a week off so that hon. Members and members of staff can make appropriate arrangements? If it is not announced soon, there is no point in having it—perhaps many of us would prefer that to be so.

Can the Leader of the House confirm which parts of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill will be taken on the Floor of the House, following the Home Secretary's statement earlier this week? Can she also confirm that the royal commission on the reform of the House of Lords is expected to report next week? Will there be a statement in the House and an early debate? Will the Government make plain their intentions for the joint Committee of both Houses, and will a Minister represent the Government on that Committee?

In the light of yesterday's statement by the Secretary of State for Defence, does the right hon. Lady accept that there is an urgent need for the defence debate that we have requested? It is unfortunate that such an important statement was made without debate in the House. Does she accept that yesterday's extraordinary statement by the Home Secretary underlines the need for a debate at the appropriate time not only on what is called the Pinochet affair, but on the inconsistency of the Government's treatment of aged people who are accused of serious crimes?

Will the right hon. Lady ensure that the House is kept regularly informed of the state of the influenza epidemic? In view of her creditable record of dealing with the millennium bug, will she ensure that the Government get better at dealing with the flu bug? May we have the date of the Budget statement, again so that Members can make appropriate arrangements, and, as I asked at the beginning of my remarks, can she give a very clear indication of the remainder of this parliamentary year?

Mrs. Beckett: First, I note that the hon. Gentleman says that he is not asking for a February week, and indeed indicated that he would be happy not to have one. That is certainly consistent with the fact that Conservative Members voted against having such a week, although not entirely consistent with all the private remarks that are made to me—but there we go. I entirely take his point, however, that the benefit of such a non-sitting week lies in the House having as early an indication of it as possible. He will recall that last year we were not able to provide a full week because of the pressure of business. I am not able to give him an indication as to what, if anything, the Government feel able to offer, but certainly hope to do so by next week. I apologise that I am not able to do so today; I would have wished to, but we are not in a position to do so yet.

The hon. Gentleman asked which parts of the Bill on funding will be taken on the Floor of the House. That is a matter for continuing discussion through the usual channels and I hope that we shall be able to reach broad agreement on it. He also asked about the date of publication and the handling of the Wakeham report—the royal commission report on Lords reform—and for a statement, an early debate and an indication of Joint Committee intentions. My understanding and expectation is that the report is likely to be published next week—probably next Thursday, I believe—and obviously the Government will have to weigh it when it emerges. I take on board his request for early observations on it. We shall have that under consideration and it can be discussed through the usual channels. I am not sure how early it will be possible to give an indication about handling in terms

of a Joint Committee, whether a Minister will sit on it and so on, but I shall bear his request in mind and convey it to colleagues.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the defence debate. He will know that the Defence Committee is urgently discussing the White Paper and we intend to have the debate as soon as possible. We have made it plain that we regret the delay. I was a little surprised that he said that it was extraordinary that yesterday's statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence was made without debate because there is nothing at all unusual about statements of Government intent being made before debate. The hon. Gentleman will know that it was well within the public domain that, following the decision of the European Court of Human Rights, the Government had indicated that they would have to take account of the decision, as every previous Government have done, and would reflect on it and make a statement in the House when a decision was made.

It seems to me that there was nothing in any way out of the ordinary about my right hon. Friend's statement, nor do I believe that there is anything extraordinary or inconsistent in my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's handling of a number of extremely difficult cases in which matters of extradition or prosecution have come into question. In all those cases, he has, first, borne in mind his own very grave responsibilities—which of course do not include prosecuting or deciding to prosecute people, as he has made plain throughout—and always reflected the law and the way that those matters are handled through our courts. He has observed and applied that principle with consistency to all those different cases, in which decisions as to whether to prosecute and what the weight of evidence justifies are always matters for bodies other than the Home Secretary, and quite correctly so.

The hon. Gentleman asked us to keep the House informed about the progress of the influenza epidemic and I shall certainly draw that to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. As to whether we handle that as well as we have the millennium bug—I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's kind remarks—I simply say to him that, even though it could justifiably have been argued that the Government had some responsibility in respect of the millennium bug, nobody can charge us with being responsible for the flu bug, although I have no doubt whatever that many Conservative Members will try.

I am not yet in a position to announce the date of the Budget statement, but I recognise that the announcement ought to be made fairly soon, and I will draw the matter to the attention of colleagues.

Finally, let me echo what the hon. Gentleman said, and wish him and the whole House a happy new year.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Leaving aside all the Pinochet defenders and apologists on the Tory Benches, may I ask my right hon. Friend to request the Home Secretary to give further consideration to putting the medical reports on Pinochet in the public domain, or at least allowing the Spanish judicial authorities to see the medical evidence about which the Home Secretary told us yesterday? I claim to speak for no one else, but I for one would be very sorry to see Pinochet returned to Chile without the conclusion of the necessary legal processes, rather than that monstrous tyrant—as I described him earlier in the week—being sent to Spain, where he should be tried for his crimes against humanity.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend has strong views on this, which he has expressed clearly and consistently throughout. As he will recall, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary was asked yesterday about the release of medical evidence, and also about its possible release to the Spanish Government. My right hon. Friend dealt in part with those questions, and made it plain that it is not Government practice to release confidential medical evidence.

I remind my hon. Friend that Home Office questions will take place on Monday. He may have an opportunity to explore the position further then.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I thank the Leader of the House for listening to what was said to her about the Representation of the People Bill, and allowing time for proper consideration before the Report stage on Wednesday.

Will the right hon. Lady find time in the next couple of weeks for a debate on the benefit uprating statement that we feel is due to the House? Will she recognise that, although taking the Government's proposals to restrict access to jury trials to the House of Lords is an entirely proper move, it also legitimises anything that the House of Lords may do to the legislation—especially given that the proposals were not in the Labour party manifesto and, indeed, are contrary to what was in it?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks. A valid point was made to us, and the Government always try to respond to genuine points relating to what is reasonable in the handling of business, from whatever quarter of the House those points may come. I will draw his observations about benefit uprating to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security, but I cannot give him a date for a debate at this stage.

The hon. Gentleman was right to suggest that views on the question of jury trials have evolved and, indeed, changed over time; but he will doubtless recall both that the move was recommended by a royal commission, and that it is supported by the Lord Chief Justice. As for his claim that the fact that legislation was initiated in the House of Lords legitimises anything that the Lords may choose to do, let me tell him that it is never wise to generalise, and, in particular, that it is never wise to encourage constitutional precedent on the basis of something that one happens to support on a certain occasion—I am thinking of the hon. Gentleman's opposition to the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill—because it is likely to come back and bite one on another occasion.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there are some rumblings, at least among Labour Members, about the possibility that the minimum wage may not be index-linked? Will she give an opportunity for those rumblings to become rather louder over the coming weeks?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware that people are concerned that the minimum wage should be properly handled.

[Mrs. Beckett]

No decision has been taken on the uprating of the national minimum wage, whatever my hon. Friend may have read in the press, but the minimum wage was always handled through negotiation, rather than through a formulaic approach, whether with regard to inflation or anything else. Decisions will be made following Ministers' consideration of a Low Pay Commission report.

Although it has been extraordinarily valuable and defeated the nonsense that was talked by the Conservative party about its impact, the minimum wage has been going only for some nine months. Although I cannot promise my hon. Friend an early debate on the matter, I draw to his attention the fact that tabling takes place today, I believe, for the next Department of Trade and Industry Question Time.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Earlier this week, the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), drew the House's attention to the fact that the announcement about the Home Secretary's intentions on General Pinochet were made to the media, not to the House. What efforts will the Leader of the House make in the remainder of the Parliament to ensure that Ministers make important public announcements first to the House, and not to the media?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman was able to be present yesterday. Indeed, sometimes the Chamber is a little noisy, so it is not always easy to follow, but, had he been here, he would know that the Home Secretary made it plain that the Home Office did not make a statement to the media. What happened was that the Home Secretary's preliminary views were leaked to the media and the Home Office was then requested to confirm or deny them. He made it plain that he had intended to make an announcement first, in the proper way, through a written answer to the House. The right hon. Gentleman will know that the Home Secretary is one of the most punctilious Ministers with regard to such matters.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My right hon. Friend will remember that, in December 1998, we faced the depressing reality of not being ready for this century—at least that was the view of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who never lets a fact get in the way of a soundbite. Just before the recess, my right hon. Friend gave a commitment to give a statement on progress on the millennium bug. Will she do that? It is important that we have the opportunity to put on record our thanks to public servants throughout the country, in central and local government, who led Britain's exercise and led the world in many respects.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is entirely right about the observations of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), who, when he was responsible for these matters—fortunately, it was not for long—made every effort to claim that, if anything went wrong, it would all be the Government's fault. However, I have heard him say nothing about how the Government deserve praise for things not going wrong in the aftermath of the changeover.

My hon. Friend is right. It is important that the House puts on record the enormous amount of work that was undertaken by many dedicated public servants, who, in the context of the millennium bug and of the millennium celebrations as a whole, gave up their free time to celebrate the holidays, so that the rest of us could do so in peace. I assure him that the Government intend to honour their commitment.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): The Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill and the Royal Parks (Trading) Bill were both casualties under private Member's Bill procedure last year, but both clearly existed as Bills in the previous Session and are now in the Government programme. Why does the Leader of the House believe that the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill is more urgent than the Royal Parks (Trading) Bill?

Mrs. Beckett: Such Bills are always a matter of fine calculation. The Royal Parks (Trading) Bill, were it to come before the House instead of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill, would nevertheless probably not pass into law in sufficient time for it to make a difference as early as the right hon. Gentleman, understandably and legitimately, would wish. Therefore, there is no argument that one Bill is more urgent than the other. He will know that many Members and, indeed, members of the public, not least those in the fur farming industry, are anxious for the matter to be resolved. The Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill is the only chance for businesses that are already in substantial difficulty to get compensation. They regret the action, not of the right hon. Gentleman, but of some of his right hon. and hon. Friends, in delaying that Bill last time.

Mr. John Cummings (Easington): Is my right hon. Friend aware that more than 150,000 ex-miners have lodged claims for chronic bronchitis, emphysema and vibration white finger, but that, under current procedures, it will take more than three years to settle those claims? Although we recognise the interest and efforts of the Minister with responsibility for those matters in making progress, several thousand ex-miners have died before their claims were considered, and several thousand more are expected to die in the next three years. Will she therefore agree to an urgent debate on that very important matter, and on other matters related to compensation for ex-miners?

Mrs. Beckett: I am, indeed, aware of the scale of the difficulties being experienced, and I know that my hon. Friend and other hon. Members—particularly those in the miners group—have pursued the matter assiduously. I agree with him—as does my right hon. Friend who speaks for the Government on those issues—that the position is unsatisfactory. I hope that my hon. Friend will be aware that a working party has been established to determine what can be done to speed up settlement of those claims. Ministers have repeatedly striven to do everything that can be done to speed up the handling of cases and the settlement of matters, and we shall continue to pursue the issue.

I cannot promise my hon. Friend an urgent debate in Government time on the matter—it is open to him, of course, to apply for an Adjournment debate—but assure him that the Government have the matter under review and will continue to press forward on it.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): The Leader of the House will be aware—as are some hon. Members—that, while we have been keeping an eye on East Timor, there have been other events in Indonesia. Is it possible for a Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister to make a statement in the House next week on the representations that have been made on what seems to be another form of ethnic cleansing—in which, on the latest figures, up to 5,000 people have died?

Is it necessary to consider the Disqualifications Bill in Committee the day after Second Reading—bearing in mind that, when the House rushes business through, we often make mistakes?

Mrs. Beckett: On East Timor, I am aware of the other difficulties that have arisen in that part of the world. Although it is unlikely that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be able to make a statement on the matter, I remind the hon. Gentleman that Foreign Office Question Time will be held next Tuesday, 18 January, when there will be an opportunity for the matter to be aired, albeit not in a statement.

The hon. Gentleman asked, quite legitimately, about the handling of the Disqualifications Bill. Although I am, of course, conscious of the fact that the House has always to balance the need to dispose expeditiously of important business with the need to get those matters right, the fact is that—as he will be aware; however contentious the issue may be—we are pursuing a relatively simple principle that is reflected in many other facets of our legislation and in the opportunities that arise for people to sit in this place and/or other places. Consequently, we shall be pursuing not a new or technically difficult matter, but the extension of an existing principle to the circumstances of Northern Ireland and Ireland itself.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on crime? As she will know, although recorded crime in the past two years has fallen by 9 per cent., many of our communities—including my own of Gedling, in Nottingham—are still blighted by antisocial behaviour. We have to determine how, together, we might best tackle such behaviour, which causes problems for so many people as they try to pursue their daily lives.

Mrs. Beckett: I am, indeed, aware of the continuing concern among the public, which is shared on both sides of the House, about crime levels. I am also aware of how much people's feelings of personal and family security are threatened by antisocial behaviour: almost as much as by crime itself. I know, too, that my hon. Friend has been complaining long and loud on the issue. He will know that the Government have taken action both to encourage and to invest in crime prevention, and to encourage local authorities and police authorities to recognise the possibilities of the tools that we have given them to deal with antisocial behaviour. We hope that they will continue to do so.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Some £4 million of taxpayers' money is being spent on special advisers, spin doctors and general hangers-on around the Government. Amazingly, another £500,000 is being spent on flying them on jollies round the world. That sticks in the throat of the hill farmers above Oswestry, who are struggling to make a living. May we please have a full debate to explain what on earth is going on?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman's figures are wrong. The total spent from public funds on the provision of policy advice is £7 million—half to the Government and half to the Opposition. That is three times as much as the previous Government offered to us, but it does not seem to have done them much good so far.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on the problems of the homeless so that we can congratulate the homelessness Tsarina on the refreshing views that she has expressed, pointing out that the problems of persistent rough sleepers relate rarely and only briefly to a lack of housing and stem mainly from mental ill health and addiction to alcohol and other drugs? Such a debate would also enable us to draw attention to what is happening in the rest of Europe, particularly Switzerland and Holland, where measures have been taken to reduce greatly the number of people sleeping rough, dealing at the same time with their problems of addiction to drugs. When those who engage in such worthwhile and progressive enterprises elsewhere in Europe are regarded as trailblazers, why are people who, advertently or inadvertently, follow similar policies in this country treated as criminals?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot undertake to find time for such a debate in the near future. Whatever views were expressed by the person who is dealing with the issue of homelessness—"Tsarina" is a new one on me—and however those views may or may not have been misrepresented, I hope that my hon. Friend is well aware of the investment that the Government are making in a range of measures. We hope that those measures will prevent people from drifting into homelessness—they include provisions to deal with those coming out of care or the armed forces, who are the most likely to do so—and tackle the complex range of problems that homeless people have, including, as my hon. Friend rightly points out, mental ill health. There will be an emergency special needs response team; new contact and assessment teams; 60 new specialist workers specifically to help those with alcohol, drug or mental health problems; more than 4,000 more beds brought into use; more than 850 new hostel beds with additional specialist help; as well as 1,000 new housing association homes. I recognise my hon. Friend's applause for what is being done in other countries such as Italy or Sweden, but I hope that he recognises that the Government have put in place policies that should tackle the problem instead of simply deploring it.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Is it not now urgent that we have a debate on the doctrine of collective responsibility in government, specifically whether the Foreign Secretary represents the Government's view on the euro? Is it not rather disturbing that a senior member of the Government has apparently expressed a view on the euro which we think may not be reflected by other members of the Government? Surely that requires a debate. Surely it is

[Mr. Eric Forth]

necessary for senior members of the Government to come to that debate and let us know whether the Government have a view on the euro, what it is and whether it is the Foreign Secretary's view or someone else's.

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman's example does not justify his claim that there is a need for a debate. The Government's policy on the euro is unchanged. It is as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said in his interview on Sunday: if the economic tests are met, the British people must decide and have a final veto through a referendum. That is unlikely to happen this side of an election and can happen only when the economic tests are judged to be met. The right hon. Gentleman is uncharacteristically falling foul of the belief that what is said in the media is in some way pertinent on that issue. Few things seem to bore the media more than consistency. Ever since we announced our policy on the euro soon after coming to office, the media have tried to see whether it has changed and whether everybody is saying the same thing. If they cannot discover evidence of dissent or difference, they continue to allege that they have found such evidence. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is familiar with those tactics and I am sorry that he has in some way fallen for them.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): In light of the interesting and controversial recommendations of the Neill committee on an appeal procedure—controversial in the sense that they will give the lawyers a real foothold for the first time in proceedings in the House of Commons—can we have an early, full day's debate on those recommendations, as many right hon. and hon. Members will have a lot to say about them?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an extremely interesting point. At the moment, I cannot undertake to find the time that he identifies as being necessary, but obviously I have taken on board his remarks. I know that right hon. and hon. Members will, indeed, take a keen interest in these matters, not least in whether and to what degree we should involve the legal profession in our affairs.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): The right hon. Lady will be aware of the importance of the fishing industry in the constituencies of at leat 50 right hon. and hon. Members. Was it not unfortunate, therefore, that the annual fishing debate was so short that only one Back-Bench Member of the official Opposition and no representative of one of the minor parties was called? In view of the crisis in the fishing industry, may we have another debate? In any case, will the right hon. Lady ensure that next year's annual fishing debate, when we discuss the quotas, is a full day's debate so that all Back-Bench Members with large fishing interests have a chance to contribute?

Mrs. Beckett: Certainly, I am very conscious of the importance of the fisheries interests. It is an important industry for the country as a whole, not just to hon. Members who represent constituencies that have fishing interests. I cannot find time for another debate in the near future, but I shall certainly bear the hon. Gentleman's remarks in mind.

Shona McIsaac (Cleethorpes): In light of the recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report on poverty, can my right hon. Friend find time for a debate to examine what the Government have been doing to eradicate poverty and put right 18 years of Tory misrule and the fact that the Tory Government hid from the British people the fact that they knew that they were plunging families into greater poverty?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely right to draw attention to the fact that, whether through the private remarks of Saatchi and Saatchi or the OECD study, it is now clear that, despite the fact that it was consistently denied by Conservative Members during their years in government, they presided over a catastrophic widening of the gap between rich and poor. One of the most challenging and radical goals that the Government have set themselves is to work towards the elimination of child poverty in particular over the next 20 years. I have no doubt that it is right to do so and that we have already made substantial strides in that direction.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): The early-day motion is an overrated parliamentary device, with some honourable exceptions used mainly by Back Benchers to gain column inches in local papers. Therefore, the right hon. Lady may not have seen early-day motion 147.

[*That this House notes with concern that the incompetence of Kent County Council's Conservative administration has led to a serious shortfall in social services funding that threatens winter provision in the county and which will create difficulties for local health authorities by causing bed blocking in hospitals; notes that the Conservatives have attempted to blame these problems on the cost of supporting asylum seekers even though this Government, unlike its predecessor, reimburses the County for at least 90 per cent. of these costs; notes that the real problem is that Kent's Conservative Council has failed, for political reasons, to plan for factors that were known well in advance such as the impact of the national minimum wage, has diverted over £5 million into largely unnecessary corporate initiatives, has based its finances on unsustainable and unworkable budgets which failed to make efficient use of the most generous Government settlement in the county's history and which inevitably have lead to a substantial overspend; notes that the Conservatives who control the council intend to resolve the problems they have created by diverting funds ring-fenced for voluntary organisations, reneging on promised regeneration funding for East Kent and cutting services for the elderly and vulnerable; and calls on the county council's Conservative leadership to work with the Government and with other political parties in Kent to devise a new budget and business plan for Kent that truly meets the needs of the county's population.*]

It was tabled by six Kent Labour Members criticising Kent social services department for a budget shortfall. Exceptionally, will the right hon. Lady find time for this particular early-day motion to be debated so that the House can learn how the budget shortfall is not £170,000, as some Labour Members seem to have suggested,

unfunded by central Government, but £4.5 million—virtually the entire shortfall—unfunded by Government and spent on economic migrants? Will she give those Members the opportunity to come to the House to apologise to their constituents for short-changing them and to join Kent's Conservatives in seeking to press the Government for the repayment of that money in full?

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that I cannot undertake to find time to debate that or any other early-day motion. The Government understand the pressures on authorities such as Kent. Indeed, that is one reason for some of the changes that we have made in the handling of asylum seekers, for example, changes which at the last minute were opportunistically opposed by Conservative Front-Bench Members—although the hon. Gentleman may have voted in opposition. With regard to local government funding generally, those issues must be seen against the background of the most generous settlement since the council tax was invented.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): May I support my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Mr. Cummings) in asking for a debate on vibration white finger?

In view of three factors: the re-entry of the International Atomic Energy Authority into Baghdad; the visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mr. Kharrazi, who suggested that, in spite of the horrors of the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian Government favoured the lifting of sanctions against Iraq; and the Turkish dam that, if it goes ahead, could cause a water war in the middle east—may we have a statement on the forgotten actions of sanctions and war against Iraq?

Mrs. Beckett: As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Mr. Cummings), the Government are mindful of concerns about vibration white finger cases. As I understand it, payments on those cases are going comparatively well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) raises primarily the issue of sanctions on Iraq and their effects. As I have already said to others, I cannot find time for a special debate or focus on that issue in the near future. However, Foreign Office questions will be held next week, and I am sure that my hon. Friend has not overlooked that point. As for saying that there are forgotten effects of the sanctions, he does himself less than justice because he has almost singlehandedly ensured that we do not forget the issue.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the location of the national athletics stadium? Following the fiasco of the proposed location at Wembley, is she aware that recent reports suggest that the Commonwealth stadium in Manchester could be altered, at relatively low cost, to make it a suitable venue for the national stadium? Is she also aware that Councillor Richard Leese, the Labour leader of Manchester city council, has talked of the Government's continuing "obsession" with staging major events in London? Is it not time that the Government woke up to the fact that there is a country outside London and started to stage some events in the rest of the country?

Mrs. Beckett: The handling of the national stadium at Wembley and the athletics stadium continues to be under urgent review. It has now become clear that it was not possible to provide a stadium that could stage both athletics and football events satisfactorily. We now have plans for what will be an excellent stadium for football and we are seeking to tackle urgently the issue of a stadium for athletics. Manchester will, of course, host the Commonwealth games. I have great respect for Councillor Leese and I understand his sentiments about the Government's obsession with staging events in London, but leaders of Manchester city council—most of them Labour, thanks to the common sense of the people of Manchester down the generations—have always felt that Manchester, not London, should be the capital of Britain.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): May I ask for an early statement from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the tragic drowning of seven members of the crew of the Scottish fishing vessel, the Solway Harvester, and the question of her retrieval from what are quite shallow waters? At moments such as this, people in fishing communities are reminded of the words of a character in Scott's "The Antiquary":

"It's no fish ye're buying, it's men's lives."

A statement might enable some of us to argue the case, as we have done for many years, that no fishing vessel should put to sea without the provision of a survival suit for every member of the crew. The provision of survival suits might have had no bearing on this tragic loss, but such safety measures should be given serious consideration by the Government. It is some years now since we had a debate on the safety of fishermen.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue of the tragic deaths that have recently been reported because it gives me the opportunity to express, on behalf of the entire House, our sympathy for the families and victims. He is right to make the point about the importance to those communities and families of the trade in fish which those of us who are not engaged in such pursuits so often take lightly.

I cannot promise my hon. Friend time for an early statement or debate on the matter, but I shall certainly undertake to draw his remarks and concerns to the attention of the relevant Ministers, who I know take the matter as seriously as he does.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The House is rightly jealous of its exclusive rights to decide taxation matters, so can we have a debate—or a statement from the Prime Minister—on the Government's stance with respect to the withholding tax? Reports have emerged that the Treasury is coming under severe pressure from the Foreign Office to back down on the issue before the conclusion of the Portuguese presidency.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear, Madam Speaker, that you must be as bored as I am with the withholding tax, about which there have been innumerable statements over the months and years, all arising from stories in the press that the Government were planning to give way on the matter at any minute. I assure the House that the Government do not plan to give way on the matter. We have made our stance on the matter quite plain, and we shall maintain that stance.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent): I should like to declare a non-financial interest in the question that I am

[Mr. Llew Smith]

about to ask. As the House will be aware, I have raised, in questions and in an Adjournment debate, the matter of the drama strategy of the Arts Council of Wales. Gwent theatre in education, probably the finest example of its type in the United Kingdom, has been denied the opportunity to continue the work that it has done over the past 20 years.

I have been concerned to find out how communities and drama companies can appeal against such decisions. An appeals procedure used to be available, but within the past 48 hours Joanna Weston, chief executive of the Arts Council of Wales, has informed the Gwent company that even those who win such an appeal will still lose their franchises, as they will have been passed on to other companies. That is an insult to the company and, more importantly, to the local communities who have benefited from the theatre in education scheme.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the process in the Arts Council of Wales for making decisions and setting priorities?

Mrs. Beckett: I know of the my hon. Friend's interest in this matter, and I understand the concern that he has expressed for the interests of his local community in that connection. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the matter in the near future. However, in view of what my hon. Friend said about the implications for an appeals process of the remarks that he quoted, I shall draw the matter to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the fiasco surrounding the millennium dome? I refer not simply to the incompetent management that caused queues and disappointment on millennium eve, but to the growing evidence of incompetence at every stage of the dome's design and construction.

That incompetence was highlighted today by the dome's former design chief, Stephen Bayley. He laid the blame at the door of the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), who is now Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Mr. Bayley described the right hon. Gentleman as "interfering, crass, incompetent" and a "paradigm of bad management". Conservative Members may have thought that all along, but it is important that we have a debate to establish why the greatest opportunity of our age has been so sadly wasted.

Mrs. Beckett: Despite the best efforts of the Opposition and of the newspapers that consistently try to advance their cause, the dome has been a success. Of course, some people will have been disappointed, but the vast majority of visitors to the exhibition have enjoyed themselves very much. Indeed, many families have said that they want to return.

The hon. Gentleman drew attention to some remarks made by Stephen Bayley. I am not acquainted with Mr. Bayley, but I am aware that he and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland failed to see eye to eye. Mr. Bayley has made such remarks ever since, and no doubt will continue to do so.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Can my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the rights of the child? She may have seen early-day motion 176 in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson).

[*That this House supports the establishment of a children's rights commissioner for England with linked officers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; and recognises that the duties and powers of such an officer would be to promote children's rights and interests and ensure that they are taken into account by ministers, local authorities, private and voluntary bodies, to promote compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and to ensure that children have effective ways of raising concerns and are able to participate in decision-making that affects their lives.*]

The early-day motion makes a specific plea for the creation of a commissioner for the rights of the child. That matter would be an important debate, and would receive a lot of attention outside the House as it is becoming increasingly urgent.

Secondly, if my right hon. Friend felt tempted at any time to have a debate on the Pinochet story as it proceeds, she should give in to that temptation. When people outside this place hear the craven and repellent apologies on behalf of butchery and murder that will undoubtedly come from the Conservative party, the Conservatives' popularity in the country will slump even lower.

Mrs. Beckett: I am, indeed, aware of the early-day motion on the creation of a children's rights commissioner. We have set up a task force on safeguards for children, and intend to establish a children's rights director as a senior post within the National Care Standards Commission. The specific issue of a children's rights commissioner continues to be raised and will no doubt continue to be discussed. These are important steps, which I know my hon. Friend will welcome.

With regard to my hon. Friend's remarks about the opportunities presented by a debate on the handling of the issue of Senator Pinochet, I share his view that, if the public were made more aware of the degree and kind of interest that has been expressed by some on the Conservative Benches, it would do nothing to enhance the Opposition's standing. However, I fear that time in this House is under considerable pressure and I must reluctantly decline to do anything further to diminish the popularity of the Opposition. They probably need no help from me to do that, anyway.

Orders of the Day

Representation of the People Bill

3RD ALLOTTED DAY

Considered in Committee [Progress, 12 January].

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Clause 9

RESTRICTION ON SUPPLY OF INFORMATION CONTAINED IN REGISTER

1.17 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I beg to move amendment No. 37, in page 10, leave out lines 22 to 35.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 21, in page 10, line 32, after "which", insert

"both the full register and".

No. 38, in page 10, line 36, leave out "full".

No. 39, in page 10, line 41, leave out "full".

No. 91, in page 10, line 42, at end insert—

"(ab) to supply to any persons registered under the 1998 Data Protection Act copies of the full register and other documents, or prescribed parts of them, on payment of a prescribed fee and for exempt purposes only".

No. 40, in page 10, leave out lines 43 and 44.

No. 41, in page 11, line 7, leave out "full".

No. 42, in page 11, line 10, leave out "full".

No. 77, in page 11, line 14, after "any", insert "personal".

No. 78, in page 11, line 15, leave out "information" and insert "names and addresses".

No. 79, in page 11, line 17, at end insert—

"(1A) Such provisions made whether in accordance with regulations made in pursuance of paragraph 10B above or in accordance with any other provision made by or under an Act shall only be made after the Secretary of State has declared that they are in the public interest and after an affirmative resolution of each House of Parliament.".

No. 43, in page 11, line 18, leave out "full".

No. 23, in page 11, line 25, at end add—

"(10C).—(1) In making provisions under paragraph 10B, the Secretary of State shall have regard to the effect of those provisions on electors, and in particular to whether the interests of electors who request that their names and addresses are excluded from the edited register, and of other electors, would be prejudiced in any way, in particular by any provisions not enabling the supply of copies of the full register to any person, or to any class of person, to whom copies of the full register were previously supplied.

(2) In making provisions under paragraph 10B which do not enable the supply of copies of the full register to any person, or to any class of person, to whom such copies were previously supplied, the Secretary of State shall have regard to the effect of those provisions on such persons or classes of persons, and in particular to whether the interests of those persons or classes of persons would be prejudiced in any way.

(3) The Secretary of State shall consult with such persons as he thinks fit on the effect of any provisions which he proposes to make under paragraph 10B and shall have regard to any representations which may be made to him by such persons or any other interested parties.

(4) No provisions shall be made under paragraph 10B which adversely affect the interests of electors.

(5) In this paragraph "interest"' shall include, but not exclusively—

(a) in respect of electors, access to financial services, and in particular to loans, credit accounts and bank accounts, and the amount of direct mail that is likely to be received by electors;

(b) in respect of persons or classes of persons to whom copies of the full register were previously supplied, the employment of workers by such persons, the costs incurred by such persons, and the level of competition between such persons.".

New clause 5—*Supply of information: report to Parliament*—

".—The Secretary of State shall compile and lay before Parliament annually a report on the workings of section 9 of this Act.".

Mr. Barnes: In addition to speaking to my amendments, I shall also speak in support of amendment No. 77, in the name of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), to which I have added my name.

My amendments would end the commercial sale of electoral registers. Electoral registers exist for electoral purposes. Nothing should interfere with their being able to fulfil their fundamental purpose. That is why the poll tax was wrong in using the interface between the poll tax and electoral registers. It probably deterred 1 million people from registering for the vote, especially young attainers who would have appeared on registers for the first time.

A number of people are deterred from registering by the thought that their names and addresses will be used for commercial purposes. Similarly, some people prefer their telephone numbers to be ex-directory, partly because they are unhappy about their names and addresses appearing in a public document.

The Government are seeking to accommodate the problem with a two-tier register which allows people to opt out of the edition that will be for sale for commercial purposes. The Conservative response is that those who opt out will be at a disadvantage, as commercial interests will not be able to confirm people's home addresses. If we ban the sale of registers for commercial purposes, credit agencies and others will have to find different ways to check people's addresses. That might inconvenience those commercial interests, but it will not inconvenience the electorate; nor will it deter people from registering.

I realise that charities could be placed in a difficult position unless amendment No. 77 is accepted. Charities, such as the Stroke Association, Marie Curie Cancer Care and the National Asthma Campaign, use information from electoral registers to run street collections for money or jumble. There are 50 such national charities, plus some local hospices, which collect more than £180 million a year in that way. They need street names and house numbers, but they do not need the names of individuals. For example, they need to know that in Acacia avenue,

[Mr. Barnes]

the odd numbers run from one to 37, and the even numbers from two to 36—that is how they base their operations.

Amendment No. 77 provides for the needs of such charities; in no way does it inhibit electoral registration, unlike the sale of registers, which may tend to deter people from placing their names on the register. There is no reason why the required information cannot be passed to charities without cost. Amendment No. 77 would work either with my amendments or with only the Government's proposals, because what is needed is the full list of addresses—not the names of individuals. I recommend upholding the sanctity of the names and addresses on electoral registers, but passing street numbers on to charities.

My amendments stress that electoral registers are established for the fundamental democratic right to vote in elections. Only if that purpose is protected should anyone outside the electoral system be allowed to have ownership or general use of the registers. The commercial use of registers deters some people from registering.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): My hon. Friend referred to the loss of names from the register after the introduction of the poll tax; he is absolutely right. However, commercial companies were using the electoral roll before the poll tax and there did not appear to be many problems. Does he agree that such use of the register was valid at that time?

Mr. Barnes: It is invalid to use the register for commercial sale at any time. I know of no research as to the number of people who refuse to register because of such commercial use; all I know is that each Member of the House will have been in touch with constituents who are not on the electoral register, and who say that the reason is because they do not want the register to be used for commercial purposes. They do not want to be inundated with material from outside organisations. When constituents tell us that they want those organisations to stop bombarding them with literature, they point out that one of the means used to target them is the electoral register.

That is an important consideration, even if it affects only a small number of constituents. The Bill is to ensure the maximum possible registration. We have introduced a rolling register in order to help with that, so we should examine carefully each deterrent to registration and try to remove it. The Government have tackled the problem by proposing two registers, one of which will be edited, with an opt-out provision. Some might argue that there should be an opt-in provision instead—that would considerably reduce the number of names in the edited register.

However, the Opposition will presumably argue strongly that the sale of registers is needed for commercial purposes, and that some constituents will be disadvantaged if their names are not included on those registers. My answer is that if we say that the commercial interests cannot have the register at all, nobody will be disadvantaged—although it could be argued that the full list will be disadvantaged—and the commercial organisations will have to discover other means by which they can contact people legitimately.

This is a very important measure. I hope that the Government, who are part of the way towards accepting the argument, will go a stage further.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Out of courtesy, may I remind the Committee of my interest with the Institute of Sales Promotion and the incentive industry? The ISP has no interest in the Bill or this issue, but I would not want hon. Members to think that I am being uncharitable when I speak shortly about the Direct Marketing Association. The incentive industry fully understands the direct marketing industry, which is another part of the marketing world. That has helped me to appreciate the concerns expressed by a number of organisations about clause 9.

I wish to refer to amendments Nos. 37 to 43, which the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) has just mentioned. To be accurate, the amendments would need to include the deletion of line 21, as well as lines 22 to 35, but our reading of the matter is that, effectively, amendment No. 37 sends a signal to the Government to delete the concept of the opt-out box altogether. For that reason, we must tell the Minister that that is one of the clear options available to the Committee.

I appreciate entirely that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire has a rather different purpose—to delete the commercial sale of the register. If, having listened to the arguments, we concluded that we would seek to support the amendment, it would be to indicate support for one option, which would be to delete the opt-out box altogether.

It is clear that this idea has not been thought through properly, and there has not been a proper regulatory impact assessment. That may explain why the CBI has estimated a minimum cost of £500 million to commercial organisations if the clause is implemented as drafted. That is why, in addition, many charities throughout the country—some of which the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire mentioned—have expressed serious reservations about restricting the use of the commercially available full register.

I stress that I am referring to the full register, as I understand that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, may suggest that his party's thinking is that only a full register should be available and that there should not be an edited version at all. That is another point of view.

We are concerned that industry has not had a proper chance for consultation. In reality, its views were canvassed only after it was clear that the working party had made a recommendation that there should be an opt-out box for consumer protection purposes, and that the Government were determined to go ahead. And many charities will find it impossible to hold house-to-house collections or to send direct mail to the many people who are likely to subscribe to them.

1.30 pm

Equally, the direct marketing industry will not be able to use the register to edit the data that it has obtained from other sources—that process controls the amount of unsolicited mail that consumers receive—but will send more unsolicited mail under a scatter-gun approach until it recognises that that is not a profitable way forward. It will then cease to use direct mail at all. That will have a

serious impact on postal services. I note from business questions that, early next week, the House will be given the opportunity to debate the future of rural post offices. In its concern for the future of the Post Office and rural post offices, it must pay regard to the effect that this clause will have on them.

Industry and the Conservative party recognise that an issue must be addressed. Whatever we do in support of the amendment of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire to send out a signal, and whatever we do with our own amendment, we recognise that there is a problem. Industry has proposed an alternative scheme with which the Minister is familiar because representatives of the Direct Marketing Association, the CBI and the Advertising Association have described it to him. It suggests that there should be no opt-out box, but that a leaflet should be prepared at industry's expense to explain all the uses to which the register might be put. That might include direct mail, financial services and its use by credit reference agencies, which is a major factor that the Government have considered.

We welcome the intimation in the letters that the Minister has sent out in the past couple of days—I presume that he will refer to them later—that the Government are persuaded that there is a legitimate credit referencing use that they would wish to continue. They have already agreed that the money laundering use could also continue. All those points could be explained in a leaflet, and the widespread and legitimate use of the register by charities and Government Departments could also continue.

The leaflet would also point out that the raw material in the electoral list would not be used as the sole basis for sending direct mail or making any contact with an individual, but would be used purely to enable those with existing mailing lists to validate the names on the lists. In other words, they would clean their lists to save unnecessary costs and to prevent individuals from receiving unsolicited mail—and those who have moved into a new house from being bombarded with unsolicited mail to former occupants. The industry recognises that that is a nuisance.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Has my hon. Friend, like me, received the letter from Help the Aged, which came up with a relatively simple solution? It suggested that the word "information" should be changed to "names and addresses".

Mr. Greenway: I have received many letters from charities, including from Help the Aged. We are not entirely clear that its suggestion meets the requirements, and I shall explain in a moment that we have another scheme that would allow the opt-out box to continue. At the moment, I am simply exploring what would occur if the opt-out box were stopped altogether, which would be one of the amendment's consequences.

Under the industry's alternative scheme the leaflet would be paid for by industry and distributed by local authorities at a cost to be borne by industry. The scheme would include a freepost system for individuals who wanted an element of privacy or restriction on the use of the electoral register, particularly to prevent its use as raw data, which would involve the register being used as the sole source of information that an organisation would act upon.

Turning to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), the scheme would enable charities to verify how many people live in a particular street so that they could plan their house-to-house collections accordingly. It would enable charities that write to individuals, as direct marketing and direct mail organisations do, to use the list to clean their data and to save unnecessary cost and expense. It cannot be sensible for charities to have to spend money on postage and printing to write to people who are no longer at an address. The use of the electoral register is very valuable to such charities.

I can tell that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department acknowledges that the scheme has considerable merit, and we hope that his mind is still receptive to it.

I turn now to another perspective on the matter. The Conservative party recognises that the Government are unlikely to be persuaded of the working party's recommendation that there should not be an opt-out box, which we understand has the support of the Data Protection Registrar, and that they fully intend to proceed with an opt-out box. With that in mind, and despite all that I have said about what might have been a preferred option, we have tried hard to produce amendments that would allow the Government to continue with an opt-out box and avoid damaging the interests of voters and those of industry, financial organisations and charities.

On the interests of constituents, there is no question but that restricted availability of the list would be damaging for credit reference purposes. It appears that the Government acknowledge that, but they seem unpersuaded that there is a legitimate use for the register in debt recovery. That seems to us an illogical distinction. It will have the same consequence for credit availability because if organisations such as banks are not able to use the electoral register to trace the whereabouts of people to whom credit has been extended, they will be reluctant to extend credit to those people in the first place. If the efficiency of debt recovery is impeded, that will have a clear consequence not only for credit availability but, in the long run, for the cost of credit.

On debt recovery, I should like the Minister to consider what happens to people who have not, for example, paid the television licence fee or vehicle excise duty. Presumably the BBC and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency currently chase up people who have not paid by checking on the electoral register. Whether or not the effect is intended, some organisations are considered to have a legitimate use because they may in some respects be seen as part of the public sector, whereas commercial organisations and banks would have that legitimate use restricted.

We do not have as yet any form of identity card system. As a result, over many years the electoral register has become the chief source of information as to where people may or may not be found. We are entirely at one with those who say that it should not be used against the interests or preferences of individuals. However, we urge the Minister to consider the matter completely in the round and to recognise that there is not a one-way street. All of us benefit in some way from the fact that organisations have access to the register and use it properly. We accept that its commercial use needs to be supervised, licensed and controlled in a more sensible way.

[Mr. Greenway]

Amendment No. 21 asks the Government to recognise that there are legitimate purposes for the use of the full register, but that these should be explained properly to voters. The amendment comes with amendment No. 22, which we are likely to discuss when dealing with a subsequent group of amendments. Amendment No. 23 is of much greater importance. If accepted, it would have the effect of placing an obligation on the Secretary of State to have regard to certain interests and to consult before making any regulations under paragraph 10B. Those interests are those of electors and constituents as well as the interests of business. I have already detained the Committee long enough on what those interests are.

Amendment No. 23 is crucial. As drafted, the Bill gives far too much discretion to the Secretary of State in the making of regulations under the new provisions. If the Minister intends making soothing noises in response to the barrage of criticism that he has already received—I suspect it will be articulated further during the debate—we think that the best response would be for him to accept the amendment or to indicate that on Report, which will be on Wednesday of next week, the House will be asked to consider a further amendment. Through amendment No. 23, we are asking that a provision be put into the Bill requiring the Secretary of State to have regard to the interests of electors and businesses, and to consult before he makes any regulations under the new provisions contained in paragraph 10B.

There is an alternative. Amendments Nos. 91, 87, 88—unfortunately, No. 89 was not selected—and 90 are consequential. However, amendment No. 23 would provide for any organisation registered with the Data Protection Registrar, under licence and on payment of a proper fee, to have full access to the commercial register. Banks and large sections of the direct marketing industry have always envisaged that there would need to be a licensing system to underpin any opt-out box arrangements. I understand that discussion about licensing has taken place between those organisations and officials in the Under-Secretary of State's Department.

The Bill sets out a requirement for provisions to which I have already referred. However, we have had no sign thus far of what form the provisions will take. How will they be structured? Who will be responsible for supervising them? What fees will be charged? How will the person responsible for supervision prescribe who can or cannot have the register? How will it be possible to stop the unofficial use of the register by spurious organisations?

As matters stand, the system is open to abuse and anomaly. At one extreme, banks and major international companies in the direct marketing sector will be denied the bona fide use of the register. I have already referred to the absurd fact that the Government remain unpersuaded that there should be no use of the full register for debt recovery.

1.45 pm

At the other extreme, as at present, anyone will be able to go down to the library and copy the full register. That may be illegal, but what is to stop people doing it? In that way, a spurious organisation could make full use of the register without anyone knowing. Doubtless such an organisation would not be registered with the Data Protection Registrar, so presumably the organisation would be committing offences under the Data Protection Acts in any event.

That adds further to the argument that to provide a role for the Data Protection Registrar or Commissioner in supervising the use of the register only for those organisations registered with the registrar would be a sensible and practical way of progressing the issue.

Mr. Fabricant: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Greenway: Before I give way to my hon. Friend, I shall make another telling point.

The local Labour party, or the Liberal Democrats, or the Conservative party—I am happy to admit this—or any fringe party yet to be established could use the register, ostensibly to canvass voters, and having canvassed voters, to recruit members, sell them raffle tickets and generally raise money.

Whatever the intention may be, that is the practical effect, yet every major charity in the land, all of which have expressed anger and frustration at the Government's proposal, will be denied the same legitimate use of the register, by virtue of the opt-out box. They will be denied the legitimate use of what is and has always been regarded as a public document.

We say that the arrangements set out in clause 9 are unsatisfactory and should not be acceptable to the Committee in their current form. Reassurances from the Minister will not be sufficient. We need something more written into the Bill.

Amendment No. 91 and the supporting amendments would provide a means of ensuring that dialogue with industry and charities continues after the Bill receives Royal Assent. We entirely understand the Minister's anxiety to get the Bill on the statute book quickly, which is why we have co-operated in the progress of the Bill and why, even last night, I said that I was prepared for Report stage to take place on Monday, if necessary. We know now that it will take place on Wednesday.

We understand the sense of urgency, but we need to know that there is some guarantee that dialogue will continue. Even in the letter that the Minister kindly sent me by fax yesterday, he mentioned continuing to consult industry about the regulatory framework. That suggests to me that there should be no difficulty in his accepting that safeguards should be written into the Bill.

Accepting amendment No. 91 would leave everything in play and provide the prospect of a sensible and practical implementation of the changes in clause 9 by an independent body that was recognised by and answerable to Parliament. We believe that that is a responsible approach. We urge the Minister to accept the amendment.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I have sympathy for some of the arguments that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) presented, and we have joined him in tabling the amendment. However, we approach the matter from a fundamentally different angle. We do not propose that there should be a separate, edited version of the register because we do not believe that such a document would be useful. The point of the electoral register is that it is comprehensive, and carries some

authority because it has been assembled by government in a detailed manner. That is different from any other register of names and addresses. Such a comprehensive register should be available for some of the purposes that the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) mentioned. There is a point in making the register widely available for credit referencing, for example.

We are worried that the proposed opt-out will be widely misunderstood by the public and that people will believe that they are opting out of junk mail. The right way of doing that is through services such as a mailing preference service. There should be a system—similar to the current telephone and fax preference services—whereby people can state that they do not wish to receive a specific sort of mailing. Preventing the circulation of the electoral register will not stop junk mail. We need a system whereby people who carry out direct marketing license themselves and are required to check the names of individuals who have chosen not to receive such material.

We understand why the working group reached its conclusions. We should take a stroll through the Data Protection Act 1998—a fascinating document, which doubtless kept us all awake as we prepared for the debate. We should examine schedule 1 and the principles of data protection. It becomes clear through reading the schedule that there is a problem with the use of the electoral register in recent years. It states:

"Personal data shall be obtained only for one or more specified and lawful purposes, and shall not be further processed in any manner incompatible with that purpose or those purposes."

Data have been collected for one purpose and used for others, but that should not prevent us from reconsidering whether there should be a national register of names and addresses that is available for specific, tightly controlled purposes within the framework of data protection legislation.

Schedule 2 of the Data Protection Act makes it clear that exceptions can be made and that the use of data can be justified when doing that is necessary to protect the vital interests of the subject of the data. There is a problem with the use of data, but the legislation suggests possible solutions.

We want to consider whether the details for the electoral register should be collected openly as data that will be used for other purposes. That gets round the problem of collecting data for one purpose and using it for another. The form that people fill in could make clear the range of purposes for which the data will be used. We should maintain a comprehensive document that carries some authority and can be used for specific, critical applications.

The credit and banking industry needs secure name and address data. It is unpleasant to write to Experian or Equifax and send them £2 when they send back a thick file that says more about one's financial standing than perhaps one would like them to know. However, when someone buys a car and wants to drive out in it immediately, the finance can be organised there and then if the data is available. In today's society, such data has to be available to enable us to be spontaneous and irresponsible consumers and rack up huge amounts of debt.

Most people, including hon. Members, would take advantage of such a system. We all need to declare an interest on credit. The credit and banking industry needs secure data. I have no fundamental problem with the data being used in the way in which I described if controls exist and the data are not abused. There is currently a good framework for managing that. If the Government move from their current position, they should do more to regulate the data rather than trying to prevent the data from being accessible.

Direct marketing companies mainly use other information. They send surveys out to people, in which one respondent in a thousand can win a free holiday, or collect names and addresses when people go into shops. The electoral register is used for cleaning such data up. That is a public interest use because it prevents junk mail from being delivered for years after someone has left a house. Companies do not want to send such mail out and people do not want to receive it, and the electoral register is the annual census against which they can run their other information and achieve a clean list. That is in everybody's interest.

The direct marketing issue is critical and we should not allow it to distract us into saying, "We need to have this opt-out for direct marketing purposes." We should look at the positive ways of making improvements in respect of direct mail and intrusive direct mail. That involves having better rather than less data and giving people options such as preference services so that they can say what they want and do not want to receive. The working group considered that, and said that, ideally, people should be given the chance to say what sort of information they do not want to receive. It wanted a multiple choice opt-out, but accepted that that could not be achieved through the electoral register. Such an opt-out could be achieved through the other services that I mentioned. People would be better served by that rather than the blunt instrument of an opt-out from the electoral register, because they could say that they do not want this or that information sent to them.

The other element is charities. I hope that the Government will look closely at our amendments Nos. 77 and 78. The Data Protection Act is clear about not handing out personal data, but I suggest that there is no problem at all in handing out lists of address points. They can be obtained in other ways—through the post office address file, for example—but the numbers of people in households are not available. If names were not being given out, I would have no problem with allowing charities in particular and other organisations that use such data to have lists of address points and numbers of occupants, which is what they need to know. That information should not necessarily be excluded, even accepting the concerns of the Data Protection Registrar, which do not relate to such anonymous data.

We suggest possible solutions in amendments Nos. 77 and 78. The first is to include the word "personal" to make it clear that other data, such as address points, can be given out and the second is to be more explicit, using the words "names and addresses" instead of "information" in respect of the restricted categories of data. I hope that the Minister may be able to inform the Committee that such anonymous data can be given out on a comprehensive basis anyway; if not, I hope that he will seriously consider whether it was his intention and that of the working group to exclude such anonymous data, rather than personal lists of names and addresses, from being handed out.

I accept that there are individuals who, for specific purposes, do not want to have themselves or their addresses identified, but we need to revisit the whole issue

[Mr. Richard Allan]

of a comprehensive list that carries authority. As the hon. Member for Ryedale said, we do not have identity cards in this country. I support that, but whether we have identity cards makes a difference. Other countries operate in a different way because they use such cards. The electoral register has become a de facto system that is equivalent to identity cards in another country and we ought to consider whether that should become a de jure system and whether we need to authorise it and bring it within the data protection framework. However, we would not necessarily be in a better position and nor would the public interest necessarily be served by simply abandoning the idea of having a register against which people could check information.

Another key point is that other people will fill the gap and other sources of data will be obtained. People will fax paper electoral registers across the globe and type them up. Mistakes will inevitably be made and those sources will be inaccurate. We need to consider that because another key principle of data protection is that data should be accurate. That is in the public interest; data subjects want data to be accurate. As a public body, we should seek to obtain accuracy at all times and more problems will be caused to individuals if other sources of data become the standard. People will find, for example, that they have a bad credit rating because someone has miskeyed a name and they have been matched against an inappropriate person. The chances of that happening with the electoral register, which is generally of better quality, are less.

2 pm

The Data Protection Registrar has referred to the growth in the use of CD-ROM and internet sources of personal data checking. People are concerned about that. Some of those sources are of very poor quality, although some are reasonable. Many are outside the framework of our legislation: they are produced abroad and shipped in. I believe that the removal of the register, rather than calming things down, would encourage the use of sources of that kind. It occurs to me that the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire may achieve his objective if the words that he wishes to remove are allowed to remain: it is possible that so many people will choose to opt out of the register that it will no longer have a useful purpose.

Mr. Barnes: Can it be said that the register has any use commercially at present? It is notoriously inefficient and inaccurate for such purposes, and commercial bodies attempting to use it presumably find themselves in a hopeless position. The Bill may improve things, but my amendments would improve them further.

Mr. Allan: The electoral register, unlike other sources, is checked annually, and a reasonable amount of canvassing goes into it. We politicians bemoan inaccuracy because we do not want to lose a single vote, and we do not like to find that a household is not properly registered. In my constituency, 20 people may be registered as living in a certain property, but when we knock on the door we find that only four people are living there, and that none of them are those whose names are on the register.

Mr. Barnes: Millions of people are missing from electoral registers. Some are registered to vote in the wrong area, and some are dead. I know that the Bill deals with some of the problems by suggesting change, but this argument seems to be based on the desirability of continuing the present situation.

Mr. Allan: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman about the inaccuracies, but I think that the register is more accurate than many other sources of data.

Mr. Greenway: The intervention of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) was timely, but I think that the opposite of what he said is the case. As I understand it, he wants to restrict the commercial sale of the electoral register because he believes that it discourages people from registering. However, a great many people who are not currently registered are seriously disadvantaged for that reason. That is why it is crucial for them to understand the importance of any opt-out provisions, or, better still, to be given an explanatory leaflet.

Mr. Allan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire is right about the disincentive to register, and I think that there are many others. I agree that the poll tax was one, and that mistake should not be repeated, but I am not sure that the proposals that we are discussing constitute a positive discouragement.

The working group had anecdotal evidence in the form of complaints sent to the Home Office, and to individual Members of Parliament. I am not persuaded. I have seen no evidence to suggest that there is a large-scale failure to register for the reasons that I have mentioned. I can see that the poll tax, or a similar move to link tax or similar burdens to electoral rights, might constitute a discouragement, but I do not think that this proposal, as it stands, constitutes such a discouragement. Nevertheless, I think that people will be misled in other respects: in particular, I think they will assume that the issue is connected with direct marketing. People who try to obtain credit on the telephone—perhaps to buy the car to which I referred earlier—will be told that they cannot have credit because they are not on the system, and that that is because they did not register with a credit reference agency via the electoral register. Only then will they discover where the problem originated.

Amendment No. 79 seeks to ensure that the Secretary of State examines the matter again to verify for his purposes and those of the House that any proposals that he makes are in the public interest. The aim is to return the issue of public interest to the debate about data protection principles. We have moved quite a long way, without necessarily considering all the public interest implications. The amendment is intended to enable the Secretary of State to ensure that any changes are subject to affirmative resolution of both Houses. We think that that is a positive move, and I am sure that the Minister will accept it, as I know from earlier debates that he is the kind of Minister who likes to say yes if he possibly can. We are offering him an opportunity to say yes to both Houses of Parliament. I am sure that he would look forward to that. It is an important point.

I hope that the Minister will say how he originally envisaged introducing the regulations and that, given the argument that it is a significant change with wide impact,

he is now persuaded that he should take a belt-and-braces approach to ensure that parliamentarians get a good chance to scrutinise the regulations in detail.

Mr. Fabricant: I apologise to the Committee for not being here at the beginning of the debate. I was at an Engineering Council meeting, from which I could not get away.

Members of Parliament have probably received more letters on this clause than on any other aspect of the Bill. The letters come from a wide range of interested parties, ranging from the Consumer Credit Trade Association to the National Blind Childrens Society, all of which will be affected by clause 9.

As I was not here at the beginning to hear the speech of the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who always makes worthwhile contributions, I will not speak at length on the amendment, but I should like to describe the sort of people who wrote to me and what they said. I mentioned in an intervention that Help the Aged had contacted me and suggested that "information" be substituted by "names and addresses". However, my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) has pointed out that that would not have the effect that Help the Aged wants.

Interestingly, the National Blind Childrens Society points out that clause 9 will be costly. May I put in a little politics? It has highlighted another stealth tax. It says:

"I would remind you that although it is the government policy to help charities and the voluntary sector a tax of £7,000 per annum has recently been imposed on most charities"—

by the Government—

"through the telephone preference system."

Sadly, it is one of the most awful of the stealth taxes in that it directly affects charities such as the NBCS.

Marie Curie Cancer Care has written to criticise aspects of clause 9. Barclays bank has said that it will create real difficulty as it

"has the potential to exacerbate financial exclusion, as the electoral register is presently used as part of the credit checking process, especially where no other data is held on that individual".

That is a problem that the Government have to address in any event.

As we have seen on programmes such as "Watchdog", some people suddenly find that they are unable to borrow money because it turns out that they have a bad credit reference. When they try to find out why, they are unable to do so. The position will not be helped by clause 9 as it stands. A similar letter has been received from the British Bankers Association. I have already mentioned the Consumer Credit Trade Association.

We have also heard from the Direct Marketing Association. One individual—let me give him a plug—Trevor Oxborrow, wrote an interesting letter from Campbeltown, Argyll. Mrs. Jefkins from Croydon, Surrey feels strongly about the issue, as does John Lovell. The WWAV Rapp Collins Group have written.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Name a constituent.

Mr. Fabricant: Sadly, of all the representations that I have received from all parts of the country, none has come from Lichfield. That is untypical of my constituents, who follow in the footsteps of one Lichfield's great sons, Dr. Samuel Johnson, a great letter writer.

I have also heard from Andy Watkins of Willingdon, Eastbourne—which is near where I was born—and from Prostaff Funding Ltd., in Chester-le-Street, in County Durham.

Clearly, there is dissatisfaction with clause 9. I hope that the Minister—like Lloyds TSB, which, also is unhappy with the Bill's provisions—is in listening mode. If he wants to buy himself a larger house, I am sure that, in the tradition of one of his very senior colleagues, he will want to borrow not from a friend, but from a building society, and to know that his credit rating will enable him to borrow the necessary sum. It is therefore in his interests, and those of all hon. Members, that clause 9 be amended. Most importantly, however, it is in the interests of charities and our constituents that it be amended as they require.

Mr. Howarth: Like my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), who has the privilege of representing a part of the country that I once represented, I have to own up and apologise for not being in the Chamber for the beginning of the debate. Unlike him, however, I have taken advantage of technology and was able to see the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) on my television screen and to follow some of the points that he made.

I should first declare an interest, as I am a parliamentary consultant to the Consumer Credit Association, which—like the many other financial organisations mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield; I shall not repeat them all—has a very clear interest in the Government's proposals. The Consumer Credit Association represents the home credit industry, which has about 4 million customers. The point, however, is that the entire credit industry will be affected by the Government's proposals, and my hon. Friend has described only some of those who are greatly concerned about them.

In moving the amendment, the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire—who is the authentic voice of old Labour, not many of whom, unlike him, put their head above the parapet nowadays—said that electoral register availability was part of a ghastly plot to enable commercial interests to flourish, make profits and take money from people. However, I think that the boot is very much on the other foot, as availability of such information is at least of mutual interest to both consumers and lenders. I submit, moreover, that availability is principally in consumers' interest.

2.15 pm

I profoundly agreed with most of the remarks of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), which may come as more of a shock to him than to me, and believe that he was absolutely right to say that consumers will suffer if electoral information is not available. Consumers who go into Currys or a car dealership to buy something but are unable to obtain credit will wonder why that has happened. Consumers will not realise the risks that they run by using the proposed provisions and removing their name from the electoral register.

Consumers are the ones who will be embarrassed at the check-out desk and irritated when they are unable to buy a product that they had every intention of buying. Financial institutions are not necessarily the ones that will be disadvantaged by the proposals.

[Mr. Howarth]

It is no good encouraging prudent lending if we deny lenders some of the means by which they may exercise that prudence in lending. As most hon. Members who have spoken in the debate accept, the electoral register provides a very important basis for prudent lending.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) made the valid point that Britain does not operate a system of identity cards. I do not support the introduction of such a system in Britain. The Government also do not support introducing such a system, as the absence of one here provides one of the few bases on which we are able to argue with some of our European partners that we must maintain border controls. Regardless, I believe that it would be impossible to persuade Parliament to pass such a system, as, quite rightly, the British people would resist having to produce an Ausweis—as they are called in Germany—at the behest of a police officer or anyone else. We are somewhat truculent as a people about that sort of thing.

Mr. Fabricant: I remind my hon. Friend and the Committee that Belgium has just withdrawn from the Schengen agreement.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful for that information—which I, too, had spotted in the pages of *The Daily Telegraph*, the newspaper that one can trust. That act, with Belgian chocolates, is one of the few advantages of Belgium.

Another aspect of the electoral register's financial role is its impact on social exclusion, which has already been mentioned in the debate. Although obtaining credit is not that difficult for most of us—although, as Members of Parliament, we are perhaps not in the most financially sound condition—banks are increasingly unwilling to lend to people who do not score well on computer checks. For those people, availability of electoral register information is even more important. Therefore, the Government's proposals to provide for an edited electoral register will increase rather than decrease social exclusion.

I am a member of the Home Affairs Committee, which very carefully considered those issues. It is worth reminding the Committee that, at paragraph 50 of our report, the Committee took the view that

"because of the importance of openness in the electoral process, and so that political parties are able properly to check the lists and to canvass voters, we see no alternative to the general principle that copies of the register should be generally available, at least for electoral purposes."

I know that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire believes that those are the only purposes for which copies should be made available, but—as not only I but many other hon. Members have made clear—there are other good reasons why electors benefit from wider electoral register availability. If the electoral register is mutilated, electors are the ones who will suffer.

The Committee, in considering whether people should be able to opt out of the register, decided that they should be able to do so only in exceptional circumstances. In yesterday's debate, the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton)—I was not able to attend the debate, but I have read his remarks—listed those exceptional circumstances.

I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman dealt with how to judge whether circumstances are exceptional, but the Committee drew attention to the fact that the Association of Council Secretaries and Solicitors has suggested that the decision might be made only on the recommendation of the chief constable for the area, a responsible person who would be able to check whether someone had a truly justifiable reason to opt out—such as in the case of Jill Dando, who was generally at risk, or of a battered woman being pursued by an ex-husband. I believe that a chief constable would be a good arbiter of who should be excluded.

I believe that the Government's proposals put us in grave danger of doing something for the best of reasons—to provide electors with a choice, and to allow people, for good reason, to exclude their name from the electoral register—that we should not do. As people see the impact of the new arrangements on their daily lives, those good reasons will lead to irritation and frustration that Parliament, having had the deficiencies drawn to its attention, failed to take them into account and steamrollered on to produce a system that does not benefit the electorate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield mentioned WWAV Rapp Collins, which, I am told, is not a pop group but the largest direct marketing mail company in Europe, accounting for 11 per cent. of the Royal Mail's business in the direct mail sector. The company puts 200 million items in the post every year on behalf of its clients, so it is a major player and a major contributor to the Royal Mail's coffers and is not to be trifled with. When I met representatives of the company yesterday, they expressed their disappointment that the business community was not well represented on the working party. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale made that point in his criticisms of the consultation process. I hope that the Minister will recognise that the commercial world is acting not only in its own interests, but in the interests of the wider electorate. Its views need to be listened to.

A mail order catalogue customer who is off the electoral register will find not just that their credit rating cannot be checked, but that the company will not be able to deliver the goods. If a customer comes from an area where fraud tends to be prevalent, the company will go to the register and ask, for example, "Does Mr. Pound live here in Ealing?"

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): That is what my wife wants to know.

Mr. Howarth: If the hon. Gentleman's wife has ordered a wonderful dress through a mail order catalogue to go to the Blairite ball of the millennium and her part of Ealing does not have a good reputation, the company will wish to verify her status. If she is not on the electoral register, the company will conclude that the order is fraudulent. That is a practical example of how the arrangement could impact on our constituents. As we all know, we will be the first to be criticised. People will write to their Member of Parliament to know what is going on and why they cannot get credit for their mail order products. We shall only be adding to our own mailbags. In the interests of the Minister's peace of mind and easing the pressure that I know he is under, I ask him not to add to his burdens or ours.

Mail order companies try to target their mailshots. If the register is not comprehensive—that word was used by the hon. Member for Hallam, and I entirely agree—they will not be able to target their mailshots so well. I accept that the register can never be as comprehensive as we would like, as the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire pointed out, but it is the most comprehensive Bible that we have. If companies cannot target their mailshots so well, the result will be more junk mail, more irritated consumers and more irritated constituents for us. It is unfortunate that we are risking that.

When I was out of the House, I worked for a company called Prime Response in Brentford. It had a fantastic idea for dealing with junk mail, called OVS—occupation verification system. It was to deal with people who had gone away or were deceased, not people who did not want to be on the list. The company wanted to use the monthly records of the utilities, because when we move house the first thing that we do is stop the gas bills in one place and start them at the new place. That is instantaneous recognition of moving house. That information would be provided monthly by the utilities, and the company wanted to run it encrypted against its data lists. Anyone who had been on a list to receive direct marketing material but had moved house would have been removed and the new occupant would not have received the previous occupant's junk mail. That was monstrously stopped by the Data Protection Registrar, who stood in the way.

Mr. Pound: It is illegal.

Mr. Howarth: I know that it is illegal, but for goodness sake, we are in practical politics to try to help our constituents. The information would have been entirely encrypted. Instead, we continue to chop down trees and irritate people for no good purpose when computerisation could have prevented that.

Mr. Greenway: Does my hon. Friend think that the Data Protection Registrar would be a suitable person to oversee the provisions envisaged in the clause? That is central to our amendment No. 91.

Mr. Howarth: I listened carefully to my hon. Friend when he spoke to amendment No. 91. I agree with him, subject to my remarks about the Data Protection Registrar and the way in which she dealt with the issue that I am talking about. She needs to be practical. My hon. Friend's suggestion in amendment No. 91 would go some way to meeting problems that have been raised on both sides of the Committee. It would meet the problem raised by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire about only people registered with the Data Protection Registrar having access to the register.

I hope that I have persuaded the Committee that there are some practical problems with the Government's proposals. The electors and consumers of Britain will be more disadvantaged than the commercial world unless we take action to remedy the idea of having an edited register. We should not pursue that idea. I look forward to hearing what the Minister says, particularly about the concerns of the financial world.

Mr. Pound: I shall speak briefly, because I have already made many of my points. I should like to follow up some of the comments of the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), who referred to a sophisticated screening system for dealing with junk mail. In my part of west London, we have a cruder, if not more earthy method of screening junk mail. I have in my garden a piece of equipment called the little rotter, which is a home composter that produces an excellent tilth to spread on the garden.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) as the authentic voice of old Labour and said that few such Members were prepared to put their heads above the parapet. Although I see myself as new old Labour, or even old new Labour—maybe even past-it Labour—I am normally only too proud and pleased to associate myself with my hon. Friend's comments, because his analyses and views are always comprehensive and well researched and usually worthy of support. Sadly, on this occasion I find myself in the unusual position of disagreeing with my hon. Friend and, even more worryingly, having considerable sympathy with the arguments expressed by the hon. Members for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), for Aldershot and, sad to say, for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan).

The hon. Member for Aldershot has spent a fair amount of time in Dartmoor prison with me. We had many conversations and I have come to have almost a grudging respect for him. I have to say that when one is locked up with a Conservative Member for any length of time, there is not much else one can do. They would not allow anything else—of course, Mr. Aitken had his poetry.

2.30 pm

Hon. Members have made a range of points around a central nexus. None of them implied anything other than that the Government's intentions in this matter, as in all matters, are good. This is not a partisan Bill. Indeed, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) apologised, as he often does, for bringing in crude party politics. There is wide recognition that something needs to be done; I hope that the Bill is worthy of amendment and will be far better for it.

We talked about the accuracy of the electoral register. There are two strands of argument. Many people consider that the existing electoral register is one of the most accurate databases of its type. There are obvious problems as it is updated in November and published in February. I moved into a property in the mid-1970s and found that the previous occupant had subscribed to a large number of esoteric gentleman's publications.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): From the Conservative Association.

Mr. Pound: *Conservative Newsline* was by far the most offensive of them. For several months they arrived on my doorstep in plain brown envelopes. It is often difficult to get credit for the first year after one moves. Although the electoral register is not totally accurate, it is certainly more than 90 per cent. accurate. Local authorities that I have known—as a citizen and as an elected representative—put a great deal of effort into it. It is as accurate as it can be. If the hon. Member for Hallam manages to get 20 names on the electoral register where there should be only four, that only confirms all my prejudices about Liberal Democrats—or most of them, anyway.

[Mr. Pound]

The two major credit reference companies—Experion and Equifax—were mentioned. Like a number of hon. Members, I have spoken to them, particularly to Equifax. Equifax is not a charity; it is a business seeking to perform a service in exchange for recompense. Making a profit is certainly not illegal and is likely to become even less illegal, and those companies provide an important service.

We have to recognise that we live in an imperfect world and a society in which many people are denied access to credit by the mechanisms that give most of us access to credit although we are on short-term contracts—except the hon. Member for Aldershot who seems to come back no matter what the electors do. There will always be an informal mechanism for gaining credit or at least cash to spend. We all know from working people in our constituencies about Christmas clubs and other savings schemes. Those mechanisms are immensely expensive to people with no access to credit and normal methods of saving and all the advantages of deferred payments and interest-free payments, but they have to use something. Surely it is better if they are included in the financial mainstream. If the springboard into that mainstream is having their name on the electoral register, so be it. If nothing else is around, let us keep it that way.

More important, the electoral register is almost a membership list of civic society. If one is on the electoral register, one is part of the civitas—one is a member of society. One can take one's part in society and one can vote. Some people on the electoral register do not have the right to vote. For example, citizens of non-European countries cannot vote in European elections. Some people on the electoral register cannot vote in local authority elections. Peers cannot vote, but they are on the electoral register. However, the fact that they are on the electoral register means that they are part of the community. They are on the membership list. It may seem an almost intangible point, but it is important to be recognised as part of society.

The point has been made about people who wish to avoid being traced. When we discussed the issue previously, the Minister said quite rightly that in a world where one can buy a round piece of plastic for a few pounds and get the names of everyone in the country, and some woman fleeing from her husband can be in fear of being relocated by technological advances, clearly something must be done. Surely the right not to have one's address shown—one's name can appear without an address—should be retained. Rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water, let us try not to damage people unintentionally while seeking to do good to people who deserve it.

I shall conclude as the point has been made. I shall resist the temptation succumbed to by the hon. Member for Lichfield who read out his daily correspondence. I have received most of the letters. My hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire made an important point about charities. We cannot and must not discourage charities, particularly in view of the statement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer last week about further Government support for the charitable world.

Like everyone who has spoken today, I have every confidence in my hon. Friend the Minister. I am sure that we can cut this Gordian knot and achieve a resolution. I fervently hope that it will not disadvantage some of the weakest, poorest and most excluded people in society whom we have an absolute duty to represent. I hope that we can show that we are worthy of their trust in us.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): I should like to put a different angle on the matter. Broadly speaking, I understand exactly why clause 9 was introduced; I can see the thrust behind it and the desire to provide a measure of protection to those who do not wish the electoral register to serve as a way of publicising their details so that they receive a lot of information that they do not want.

I turn to the matter not so much as an issue of principle, but with a lawyer's eye. What strikes me about clause 9 is that lawyers will make a lot of money out of it. It is an enormously complex clause. While I fully understand that the Government cannot provide the detailed provisions that will subsequently be made in regulations, there is quite enough here to make me think that it will all be unworkable. Are we not simply adopting the tactics of King Canute? The material will be in the public domain. Whether or not we seek to regulate it in the way that clause 9 suggests, people will undoubtedly make use of it. I am sure that they will be sufficiently creative to deny that the information comes from the electoral register.

I have a niggling feeling that, despite our having gone through all this paraphernalia, people will still make use of the full register while denying that the information comes from that register, and very little will be able to be done about it.

The debate—which has been very interesting—has gone through various possible permutations about how the system should be regulated. It may be the chief constable who says that certain people can be excluded from the edited and the main register. A little bell rings in my mind saying that there will be lawyers' fees on judicial review. Let us face it: countless people will want to challenge it and disagree with the verdict. Unless the Minister produces provisions that are so remarkable that I shall stand up and admit that I have got it all wrong, I think that we are making a rod for our backs when there has always been widespread acceptance that the electoral register is a public document and people may make use of it. It is one of the burdens of citizenship that we were discussing yesterday.

In supporting the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), I see it not as the be-all and end-all of the matter, but as just possibly a step in the right direction. Generally speaking, I am troubled by clause 9. That is not because it is ill-intended—the Government clearly have proper intentions—but because it is unworkable. It is a great merit in legislation to keep things simple. Anybody reading clause 9 would know at once that it was complex and difficult. We may regret what we have done when the consequences start to seep through, although members of my profession will probably be delighted.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): We have had a good debate, and I welcome you, Mrs. Dunwoody, to the Chair. Important points were made by all the hon. Members who participated, mostly in non-partisan fashion. Despite sterling efforts, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) failed to be partisan and, in fact, sounded very reasonable and balanced.

In many ways, the debate followed yesterday's interesting and important debate on the way in which modern technology, especially the search facilities that CD-ROM provides, enables people to identify the address of anyone who is registered to vote within a short time by pressing a few computer keys. That could enable someone searching for a battered spouse—or a stalker searching for his victim—to use the electoral register to find the person, a purpose for which it was never intended. We discussed the possibility of having what I called secret voters and others called anonymous voters. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) made some important points and touched on that proposal. The House considered that yesterday and took the view that the proposal would cause so many difficulties that it should not be adopted at this stage.

The essence of the Government's position—and that of the working party—is that people should not be obliged by law to register to vote and then have their whereabouts passed, without consent, to someone else who may intend to use the information for purely commercial purposes, requests for charitable donations or more sinister reasons. At the moment, it is possible for someone to obtain the information without the consent of the person who is registered, but that person is obliged by law to register and must pay a penalty if he or she does not. That raises a serious issue about the right to privacy and begs the question of what we are using the sanction of the law, including the ability to fine people, to achieve, when they may have reasons for wishing not to disclose their whereabouts.

The ability of commercial companies to use the register for sending junk mail is one of the main sources of complaints to returning officers and the Home Office. People are sick of junk mail and they want something to be done. Individuals have a right to privacy and should be able to consent to the release of information about them. The current position may also trespass on some areas covered by the European convention on human rights, but that may be an issue for the courts at a later stage. We have also touched on issues of data protection and the way in which information is used. I assure the Committee that the Data Protection Registrar was consulted throughout the formulation of our policy.

2.45 pm

Mr. Allan: I agree that the debate raises data protection issues. Did the Government consider the other option of trying to ensure that the compilation of the register complied with data protection principles while still allowing its use for wider purposes? Was that considered or was the only response to try to limit the use of electoral register?

Mr. O'Brien: The working party formulated the strategy that we have sought to implement. That working party included a representative from both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative party, and they united behind the view that has been put forward. The Data Protection Registrar was also fully involved in considering the issues.

If the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) were to be accepted, there would continue to be only a single version of the electoral register listing the names of all electors in the relevant area, but its availability would be severely limited. Only those people who had been prescribed in regulations would be able to obtain it and they could use it only for certain prescribed purposes. There would be no edited version that could be bought freely and used for wider purposes.

I am aware that my hon. Friend is not alone in believing that much tighter controls should be placed on the availability of the electoral register. It was because of this that the working party on electoral procedures devoted considerable time to the issue. Its conclusion, which was supported by all of its members—including Liberal Democrat and Conservative—was that:

"the arguments for retaining a commercially available register are strong".

Nevertheless, the working party recommended that people should be able to opt out of being included in the register that was made available for sale. The working party suggested that there should be two versions of the register—a full one that could be used for electoral and law enforcement purposes and an edited version, which would be freely available for sale, containing only the names of those who have not exercised their right to be excluded from it. Clause 9 allows for regulations to that effect to be made. As we explained on Second Reading, we are still considering exactly what form those regulations should take.

I assure the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) that we will fully consult the various industries involved, the charities and others, as part of the process of bringing forward regulations. Indeed, no doubt the House will wish to discuss in due course the impact that the regulations would have.

Few things in life are simple and few things are more difficult than trying to balance competing interests. This is a classic case where different interests are pulling in different ways. On the one hand, the working party on electoral procedures was very clear that, as a matter of principle, information that individuals are required by law to provide for one purpose should not be available for use for other purposes without their consent.

We must also take very careful consideration of the European convention on human rights and data protection principles, as well as the more general notion of a right to privacy. We know that the public resent the delivery of junk mail, some of which they receive as a result of their names appearing on the electoral register. More worryingly, we know of cases where abusive spouses have traced their former partners through the register.

Mr. Greenway: What research has the Department undertaken into how often the electoral register is used as the raw data and sole source for the sending out of unsolicited mail?

Mr. O'Brien: I shall come to the question of unsolicited mail in a moment. However, for the companies who send out such mail, the register is only one of a number of sources of raw data. The factors that arouse concern in all members of the Committee need to be balanced by recognition that this country has flourishing credit and direct marketing industries. They make extensive use of the electoral register, and we would like to avoid doing undue harm to them—or to the charities that also use the register. We are considering how best to achieve that balance.

[Mr. O'Brien]

I can assure the Committee that we are in touch with the industries concerned. Home Office officials held a meeting with representatives of the credit industry just before Christmas to see whether a way could be found to accommodate the industry's needs within the constraints imposed by the EU data protection directive and the European convention on human rights.

Those discussions will inform any regulations that we introduce. Such regulations—which I assure the Committee will be accompanied by a full regulatory impact assessment—will be fully debated in the House. I can also tell the Committee that those regulations will be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. That answers one of the points raised in amendment No. 79.

Amendment No. 23 is unnecessary and, because it would tilt the scales firmly in one direction, prejudicial.

I can deal briefly with amendment No. 21, as I do not object to it.

It might be helpful to the Committee if I were to say a little about the arrangements for introducing the new system with two versions of the electoral register. The public will obviously be unfamiliar with the new opt-out box on the electoral registration form and will need to be given an explanation of its purpose and effect. We propose that the form should be accompanied by an explanatory leaflet. We have already discussed this with the credit and marketing industries, as the hon. Member for Ryedale noted, and we believe that they will want to play their part in helping to settle the content of the leaflet. They have already indicated that they would be willing to pay some or all of the costs involved, as the leaflet would clearly bring some direct benefit to them.

The leaflet would need to explain the uses to which the edited register may be put. The key point is that people will be able to make an informed decision about exercising their right to opt out. They will have that choice, and it will be up to them to make it.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: In his consultations with the credit industry, has the Minister accepted that the paramount need is that the leaflet points out—in words of one syllable and in the boldest possible fashion—the risk to electors, as consumers, if their names are removed from the main register?

Mr. O'Brien: There would be no point in having a leaflet if it did not say in clear terms what the impact of opting out would be. We believe that people considering opting out should be clear about what the effect would be. We want the leaflet to tell people that opting out might affect their ability to get credit or other services that they might want. If they were to decide to opt out of the edited register, they should know what the consequences would be. No doubt, some people will choose to opt out, and that will be their right.

However, I point out that opting out is a physical action: people who do it will have to tick a box. It may not be much, but it would require a positive decision. After reading the leaflet, many people will make an informed decision not to tick the box. In that way, for most practical purposes, the register will remain much as it is now. Some people, however, will decide—for their own, very good, reasons, such as personal safety—that it is right to opt out.

Mr. Greenway: The Minister said that the Government did not object to amendment No. 21. It deals with the matter of the leaflet, as does another group of amendments that we shall come to later. I am grateful for what the Minister said about the importance of the leaflet's contents, and I hope that we will be able to debate that further in a moment.

However, will the Minister tackle the question of the organisations to which the full register will be available? The letter to Colin Lloyd, chief executive of the Direct Marketing Association, made it clear that the full register would not be available for direct marketing purposes. If that is so, many hon. Members from all parties will remain deeply unhappy.

Mr. O'Brien: During the consultations, we want to ensure that all interests are taken into account. We also want to ensure that the leaflet informs the public about the possible uses to which both the full and edited versions of the register may be used for. I am therefore happy to advise the Committee to accept amendment No. 21.

Mr. Pound: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: This will be the last time, as I want to make some progress.

Mr. Pound: I thank my hon. Friend. Is the opt-out to be a rollover? Will people opt out once and for ever, or will they have to do so every year, as the register is renewed? Is the leaflet to be amended every year, or will it stay the same for, say, five, 10 or 15 years?

Mr. O'Brien: People will fill in a form each year, and so, in effect, will be able not to opt out each year. The Government, with the industry, are studying how people, even though they have read the leaflet, might want to opt back in when they discover the implications of opting out. Because there will be a rolling register, we will be able to make new versions of the register available. People may choose to opt into that, thus preventing a delay until the next year.

For example, people who discover that they need credit will want to opt into the edited register. They may well be able to do that. We shall have to determine how that might be facilitated and the burden that doing so might place on electoral registration officers. I am not giving an undertaking that we will be able to do it, but we will be happy to explore, with the industry, how that might happen.

Mr. Greenway: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I said that I would not give way again, but I shall do so for the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Greenway: I repeat my earlier question. Will the direct marketing industry be among those for whom the full register will be available? The hon. Gentleman's letter of 12 January to the chief executive of the Direct Market Association makes it abundantly clear that the full version

will be made available only for electoral purposes, law enforcement, crime prevention, and in connection with applications for credit. That is being interpreted as meaning that organisations involved in direct marketing and even debt recovery will not be able to have the full register.

Mr. O'Brien: We are discussing the detail of that with the industry. It is our intention that the full register shall not be completely available to the direct marketing industry. However, we are examining with the industry ways in which credit issues can be better resolved. Direct marketers will not receive the full register because that would conflict with the European Union data protection directive.

3 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for not giving way, but I have said that I want to make progress.

I see very little point to amendment No. 91. I do not think that it serves any real purpose, and it also introduces a new and undefined concept of exempt purposes. Clause 9 replaces paragraphs 10 and 11 of schedule 2 to the Representation of the People Act 1983 with four new paragraphs. Those paragraphs govern the regulations that may be made under that Act.

New paragraphs 10B(l) and 11(1) are quite clear. They allow for regulations to be made requiring or authorising electoral registration officers to supply copies of their full electoral register to specified people for specified purposes. But—this is the crucial point—we believe that the Bill is flexible enough to accommodate whatever regulations the House chooses to make. Anyone whom it is decided should be entitled to a copy of the full register will be able to receive it, and it will be possible to limit that person's use of it to prescribed purposes.

The suggestion in the amendment that access to the full register should be granted to those registered under the Data Protection Act does not take us any further forward. Anyone may be registered under that Act, and the test should be whether a person or organisation has a good case for having access to the full register rather than whether they are so registered.

I hope that, in the light of what I have said, the hon. Member for Ryedale will realise that the amendment is unnecessary and will withdraw it.

I must admit to being somewhat confused by the Liberal Democrats' amendments Nos. 77 and 78. They would substitute for the word "information" the words "personal names and addresses". It is not clear what that is intended to achieve, although I listened with care to what the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) said. The only information on the register is personal and consists of names and addresses, plus ages of young people who will attain voting age during the currency of the register. That information would not be much use without their names and addresses, although I understand the point that removing the names is one way of approaching the matter.

I appreciate that some charities use untargeted mailshots and simply need to know how many households there are in a street rather than the names of the occupants. Direct mailings resulting from the electoral register, however worthy the originators, are one of the main sources of complaints to the Home Office and electoral administrators. We would need to be very careful not to undermine any new regime relating to access to the full electoral register by creating too many exemptions. In any event, the edited register will normally be sufficient for ascertaining how many households are in a particular location. There has been confusion on the part of charities about knowing how many people were registered. In fact, there is no reason why the edited version of the register should not say how many people are registered, without identifying their names or addresses.

Amendment No. 79 is quite simply unnecessary. As I have already explained, regulations on this matter are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. The requirement to issue a declaration that regulations are "in the public interest" is therefore unnecessary. The Home Secretary would never bring forward regulations which he did not believe were in the public interest—nor, I hope, would any Home Secretary—and Parliament would not endorse them if it did not hold the same belief.

Finally, let me say that I have sympathy with the spirit behind new clause 5. The Bill will make significant improvements to our electoral procedures, and it would be quite wrong if, having introduced the changes, we sat back and ignored their operation, but that will not happen. Too many people are interested in the operation of our electoral procedures to allow problems and weaknesses to go unaddressed. The working party on electoral procedures, whose report has given birth to the Bill, is an example of the constant review process. Reference has also been made to the Select Committee on Home Affairs, which published its report on electoral law and administration a year ago. That is a further illustration that our electoral procedures are the subject of continuing scrutiny.

Once new regulations governing access to the full electoral register are in place, we can expect the public and any industries which are affected to make their views known about the impact of those regulations. Political parties and electoral administrators will doubtless also have a view. If I may be so bold, I suggest that the electorate, political parties and candidates, industry and the electoral administrators will, between them, provide a far better impression of the effectiveness of our electoral procedures than a report compiled in Whitehall.

I have no doubt that hon. Members will continue to raise points of concern and, where appropriate, changes will be made to accommodate them. A good example of this is the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998. There was concern on both sides of the House about spoiler candidates, although I know that the party of the hon. Member for Hallam had particular reason to feel aggrieved, and we introduced legislation to deal with the problem.

I apologise for having spoken at such length, Mrs. Dunwoody, but it is important to deal with these crucial issues. I should like to deal with a couple of other points raised in the debate. I was asked whether the electoral register will continue to be used for dealing with issues such as money laundering checks. The full register will be available for law enforcement and crime prevention purposes, which include money laundering and

[Mr. O'Brien]

fraud prevention checks. We have invited the financial industry to consider the best way in which to facilitate that.

We are considering the extent to which the full register will be available for financial institutions for credit reference checks, as I have already said. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) asked whether the provisions would harm the socially excluded. There is an argument that people on the margins of society would be less likely to be given credit if they were given the right to opt out of the commercially available register. As the socially excluded are the group least likely to register, we do not believe that that is the case. Indeed, the Bill will make it easier for the homeless and those who change their accommodation frequently to get on the electoral register. They are not obliged to opt out, in which case their chances of getting credit are increased. The hon. Gentleman also spoke about people not being able to obtain credit. No doubt, people will take that factor into account when they read the leaflet.

The hon. Member for Ryedale referred to the claim of the Confederation of British Industry that the changes would cost business £500 million, and asked how that could be justified. The figure of £500 million that the credit industry produced represents, by its own admission, the cost to the industry rather than to the economy as a whole. We suspect that much of the effect will be offset by displacement. A person who is refused credit when trying to buy a video recorder will go elsewhere for it or will spend the money on something else.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the extent of consultation with the credit industry during the working party. I assure him that there were many representations from charities and businesses, and they were taken fully into account during the course of the working party's deliberations.

We do not propose to make the full register available for the purposes of debt recovery. We have agreed that with the Data Protection Registrar. Her view is that to allow the register to be used for debt recovery would breach the data protection directive.

We propose that people should be able to make an informed choice. Through this measure, we are enabling them to do so. The way in which the measure will operate will give individuals some protection of their privacy and will offer some limited protection to those who may, for perfectly legitimate reasons—perhaps for their personal safety—not want their names and addresses to be widely disseminated. We believe that we have struck a balance in the legislation, which will achieve some safeguards for the industry and will ensure that individuals are taken into account, and that their privacy is not sacrificed for commercial gain. I hope that we have been able to get the balance right.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) pointed out that the legislation was complex. His view seemed to be that we were adopting the tactics of King Canute. In effect, he was almost arguing that we should give up any idea of having individual choice and privacy and not try to protect them. He suggested that that would cause—horror of horrors—some judicial reviews. As the Minister who has probably been the most judicially reviewed of all members of the Government during the past three years, I point out to the hon. Gentleman that judicial reviews can be properly dealt with; indeed, they can enhance the law. In relation to the distribution of the burdens of citizenship, I want to give a little more strength to the individual, rather than to the collective. As a Conservative, the hon. Gentleman might see some advantage in doing so.

Mr. Greenway: I have a few comments in response to the Minister's remarks. Anyone who has been watching our proceedings during the past two hours could only conclude that the Committee of the Whole House has been displayed at its best in this debate. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have made strong and convincing arguments to which the Minister has responded in considerable detail.

However, we can only offer the Minister one and a half cheers for his response.

Mr. O'Brien: Why not two cheers?

Mr. Greenway: No, I think it should be one and a half. We are grateful to the Minister for suggesting that he would accept amendment No. 21. I hope to catch your eye, Mrs. Dunwoody, when we come to the next-but-one group of amendments, so that the Committee can briefly discuss leaflets. I am grateful for the Minister's acceptance of the fact that the leaflet explaining to households the consequences of ticking an opt-out box is still a matter for debate, and for his recognition of the importance of such a leaflet in enabling voters to understand the matter. That is the reason for the one and a half cheers.

However, the Minister has not convinced the Committee that the full register should not be available more widely than it would be under his proposals. It is completely illogical that the data protection directive permits the full register to be used for credit referencing—we are grateful for the Minister's confirmation that the Government agree with that—but not for debt recovery. Similarly, the full register will not be made available, through whatever limited, licensed and regulated means—all yet to be determined—for the direct market industry and many other companies that have a legitimate use for it.

Clause 9 will provide for regulations, which are yet to be laid—I appreciate that they will be subject to further discussion—but the effect will be to supply copies of the full register only to prescribed people. However, we are not 100 per cent. sure who those people will be and, more important, about the mechanism whereby they will be included in the list for the full register, or not put on the list and told that they cannot have the register.

3.15 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth: In relation to the credit industry, is my hon. Friend clear as to whether the Government intend to make the full register available only to the major credit reference agencies, or to the wider credit industry—the banks and other finance houses?

Mr. Greenway: My interpretation of the Minister's remarks is that the register would be available to the credit reference industry, but not to the banks—hence my point as to the illogicality of the measure. There is no way that the data protection directive can grant consent to give the

list to one and not to the other. Perhaps, we shall have the opportunity to debate the matter again on Report next week.

I hear what the Minister says about amendment No. 91, but the fact is—

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I hope that I can clarify the point. Certainly, the full register will be available to political parties, but it would not be available, in an uncontrolled way, to everyone in the direct marketing or the various credit industries. However, we are discussing with the industries whether we might devise with them properly controlled and safeguarded mechanisms so that individual privacy would be protected, while allowing for some checking.

Mr. Greenway: Perhaps that gets us to two cheers, but we are still missing one. We are still not satisfied that the Committee has a sufficient idea of how prescription under these new regulations will differentiate between one organisation and another. The real reason that we tabled amendment No. 91 and that we ask the Committee to support it—despite the fact that the Minister has given way on some points—is because it is the only measure that gives us a clue as to whom the full register might be made available: organisations registered under the Data Protection Acts. Those will all be bona fide organisations. The Minister's point as regards continuing discussion relates to the way in which organisations use the full register. That is valid; we understand that those regulations will be equally important.

However, I ask the Committee to reflect on the fact that we are talking about two quite separate stages of the process. The first is the prescription of those to whom the full register will be available—to which organisations. The second is the prescription of what those organisations can do with the full register. Before Report, the Minister needs to do a little more work on the first stage. For that reason, I ask the Committee to support amendment No. 91 in a Division, not because the amendment is perfect, but to show the Minister that we are still dissatisfied about the availability of the full register to bona fide organisations.

Mr. Barnes: The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) apologised for missing my speech moving the amendment. He is now missing the great opportunity to hear my second speech on the matter. I am not sure whether it is a criticism of the hon. Gentleman, or of me. He wanted the register to be available widely for commercial use and by charities. I am in favour of charities having addresses for collections of jumble and so on, which is why I support amendment No. 77. I am trying also to block the commercial usage of electoral registers.

The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) described me as old Labour, yet if he looks at many of my amendments, he will see that I am an arch-moderniser. In fact, I am such a moderniser that I am ahead of Government Front Benchers on these matters. Modernisation is supposed to be the main element of the third way philosophy, which has gripped the Labour party, so it is not easy to define my position as old or new Labour.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) and the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) referred to the register as if it were accurate and reasonable. My hon. Friend waxed lyrical about the register, which he regarded as a sign of citizenship upon which everybody was established. It is not because masses of people are missing from it, and there are some whom we do not allow to register.

In earlier amendments, I proposed to enfranchise 680,000 overseas residents in this country who are not entitled to be on a register and are not part of our civic list. How will they get credit facilities in this country if the electoral register is used for this key service for our citizens? I bet that many of those 680,000 will manage well the arrangements within society in terms of credit and other companies.

The hon. Members for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) and for Hallam are cherry-picking my amendments. There is nothing wrong with that—I am a cherry-picker in terms of the Patten report on Northern Ireland. However, their cherry-picking is wrong, and the Opposition are attempting to turn my amendments into the exact opposite of what I propose by latching on to a particular amendment.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Would the hon. Gentleman prefer the Opposition to agree with him some of the time, or never?

Mr. Barnes: I prefer hon. Members to listen to what I have to say, understand it and support absolutely everything that I say.

The hon. Member for Hallam argued for the need for a national register containing everyone's address. If there is a case for that, it would seem to be a matter for an entirely different Bill. To try to subvert the electoral register and to make it a second best national list of names and addresses is inadequate.

I have sympathy for the notion that there should be a national register, tightly controlled by the data protection and other provisions. If there was such a register, it would be a marvellous device to ensure that the electoral register was a proper one, containing everyone's name. However, we do not have that. Neither do we have identity cards, for which the hon. Member for Ryedale argued. I support identity cards but, again, I do so because I see them as a marvellous means of assisting full electoral registration.

Full electoral registration is of overwhelming importance. We are discussing the basic building block of a democracy—the vote. Many other important matters flow from that, such as people's rights in society, their right to organise and so on—but having the vote is the first element. That is why we should ensure that everyone in society is on a register, which is what my amendments are about.

I believe that there is a deterrent effect, of which I have become aware through constituents who have not put their names on registers or are reluctant to have their names on them as they believe that they will be used for other purposes. If people want to engage in general mail shots, registers are not needed. They can use the Post Office to deliver to every house in an area.

One thing that worries me about the Government's position—what I see as the second-best position—is the opt-out box to be ticked if one does not want to be placed on the registers for commercial sale. This will be a great surprise to many of the electorate when they discover that the electoral register is already being used on such a wide

[Mr. Barnes]

basis. They will be astonished to discover that the register is used for more than just electoral purposes. They will be astonished to discover that it is available in libraries and post offices. When they discover that, they will be unhappy about the arrangements. They will be worried about their neighbours and others being able to check up those matters.

There is also to be a leaflet to alert people to the fact that that has been taking place all along, which will be quite a shock. People may tear up the registration form when they see all of the complexity involved.

My hon. Friend the Minister adopted a balanced position—it reminds me of the Erasmus principle; not too little, not too much, but just right. On one extreme, there is my proposal. On the other, there is the Conservative proposal—to give the register to everyone with money. Then we have the third way between the two extremes to try to get some balance.

The prime argument is the sanctity of the electoral register. If people want some of the other measures that are being talked about, they should turn to legislation in those areas. However, on the principle that I do not believe in banging my head against a brick wall, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Greenway: I beg to move amendment No. 87, in page 10, line 22, leave out

"a registration officer to prepare"

and insert "the preparation of".

The Temporary Chairman (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 88, in page 10, line 23, after "which", leave out "he" and insert "the registration officer".

Mr. Greenway: It is our understanding, following discussions with some departmental officials, that both banks and financial institutions and the direct marketing industry have advanced the concept that it may well be advantageous to provide for a third party to prepare edited versions of the full register, rather than electoral registration officers. Depending on the outcome of the discussions and the position eventually taken by the Government, there could be quite a big work load for electoral registration officers in the preparation of edited registers and in supervising access to them.

3.30 pm

We understand that some encouragement to the concept in the amendments has been given in the discussions. However, the Bill will not allow for a third party to prepare the edited register or to have any role in preparing either the full or the edited register. So amendment No. 87 would at least provide for that eventuality. The register would not have to be prepared by the electoral registration officer, but could be prepared by a third party. Amendment No. 88 would have a similar effect.

To an extent, these are technical amendments, but they would be crucial to the involvement of a third party. However, they would not require the involvement of a third party if, at the end of the negotiations and discussions, Ministers were not satisfied that anyone other than electoral registration officers should prepare the registers. The change of wording would not commit the Government to accepting the involvement of a third party, but it would provide the opportunity for a third party to prepare the full or the edited register, or both.

I hope that I am in order if I say that amendment No. 89, which has not been selected for debate, would also be important to such a scheme. It would ensure that the Bill fully meets the requirement for the third-party preparation of registers.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what is an interesting idea. I do not think that the amendment is necessary, but I now see where he is coming from. I have sympathy with his aim of ensuring flexibility. However, I do not think that we need the amendment because the Bill already provides such flexibility.

Preparation of the electoral register is an important function, which is why it has the status of a statutory function and why every relevant local authority must appoint an electoral registration officer. The registration officer may, of course, employ other people to assist him in his duties, although the final responsibility must always rest with him.

The Bill contains provisions that will enable an electoral registration officer to employ another organisation or other individuals to assist him with the preparation of parts of the register. The Bill's wording already provides that flexibility. However, I will consider the hon. Gentleman's suggestion to see whether a change of wording might be useful. I should be able to do that within the next few days and we may be able return to the matter, if not on Report, then in another place. The hon. Gentleman has made a useful proposition and I will give further thought to it. However, at present, I do not think that the amendment is necessary.

Mr. Greenway: Can we be clear what the Minister is saying? Has he received advice that the preparation of the register does not preclude electoral registration officers sub-contracting work to someone else?

Mr. O'Brien: That is correct, providing that the final responsibility for what is done and how it is done remains with the electoral registration officer. That is my understanding, but I will take further advice to ensure that that is the position. I shall certainly write to the hon. Gentleman if anything changes.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful to the Minister for his helpful response. I take it from what he said that we are correct in our assumption that the idea is being considered and that it is a question of whether the Bill allows for it. I am grateful for his promise to reconsider the issue. I hope that on Report next Wednesday we can reach a conclusion. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Greenway: I beg to move amendment No. 22, in page 10, line 26, leave out "or on behalf of".

The Temporary Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 73, in page 10, line 32, leave out ", and".

No. 90, in page 10, leave out lines 33 to 35 and insert

"explaining to persons registered or applying to be registered, or persons acting on behalf of such persons, the means by which they may secure the exclusion of their names and addresses from the edited register".

No. 74, in page 10, line 35, at end insert—

"(c) confirming that personal approval has been given for the exclusion of their names and addresses from the register;

"(d) explaining fully the consequences of exclusion of their names and addresses from that register.".

No. 75, in page 10, line 35, at end insert—

"(3) Provisions requiring that the excluded names and addresses be reinstated on the register in the event of the person registered so requesting.".

Mr. Greenway: The amendments deal with an important issue. When a householder completes the electoral registration form that he will be sent each year or which he requests when moving house so that he can be placed on the new rolling register, we understand that the householder alone will be responsible for ticking the opt-out box on the registration form. He will do so on behalf not only of himself, but of all the other voters at that address.

We are encouraged by what the Minister said earlier about the importance of the leaflet and of the explanation given to electors about the consequences of ticking the opt-out box. However, it is not acceptable for a householder to take responsibility for other adults, so that they do not receive mail or so that their names and addresses are not available to credit reference agencies.

I shall describe the best example that has been provided by industry. Dad fills in a form, but one, two or three of his children of voting age may be at university or college. Quite properly, they will be on the register for their home address, but dad might tick the opt-out box so that all the registered voters in that household go on the edited register. His daughter who, let us say, is at university in Durham—which is where one of my three children went—may go to a shop to buy a television on credit, but may suddenly discover that she cannot receive credit because dad ticked the opt-out box. Her name and address will not be on the list to which the supplier has access.

I know that you, Mrs. Dunwoody, are greatly interested in media matters and that is an interest that we share. However, I was astounded, when I went to the Comet store in Old Kent road to get an ONdigital package, to find that I was able to take it away because the young lady at the counter was able to tap into her computer and discover my address in Gilbert road, Kennington, owing to my being on the electoral register. I suspect that if I had not been on the electoral register, I would not have been allowed to take the item away, regardless of the fact that I am a Member of Parliament and the holder of God knows how many credit cards.

The point that we are stressing in the amendment is that it cannot be right for the householder alone to have responsibility for opting out of access to a whole range of services on behalf of other adults. Unless the Minister is going to give us cause for another cheer, we are not asking him to accept the amendment today, but we hope that on Report on Wednesday he will state whether the leaflet will make clear the consequences of opting out for all members of the household.

If possible, the leaflet, as well as the electoral registration form, should provide the opt-out box. Any member of the household who wanted to opt out could then do so by using the leaflet, rather than ticking the registration form, which of course most of us want to fill in and send off as quickly as possible, rather than leaving it lying around, particularly as it always comes with a prepaid envelope. Inadvertently, the householder may create a problem by simply ticking the opt-out box on the form.

We covered amendment No. 90 in an earlier debate. It would add to the Bill because it would make it clear that the leaflet provided for in clause 9 would have a specific task of explaining to persons registered or applying to be registered the means by which they may secure the exclusion of their name from the edited register. That would provide more opportunity precisely to spell out the consequences of ticking the opt-out box, which the Minister has acknowledged is important. Our earlier debate made clear those consequences, which every member of the Committee understands could be far reaching, so they should be properly explained.

Mr. Allan: I rise to speak to amendments Nos. 73 to 75, in the names of my colleagues. Amendment No. 74 covers some of the same ground as the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). It is important that we consider who should be able to authorise the opt-out and the exclusion of someone's name from the edited register. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's speech will have persuaded masses of people not to opt out of the main register when they learn that they will be excluded from the delights of ONdigital if they do so.

There is a fundamental issue of principle here. Earlier the Minister was talking about the individual's choice, and if choice is a principle, to have someone deciding, on behalf of others, to opt out of the register, would be incompatible with the arguments advanced by the Minister. I was attracted by the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Ryedale—that the opt-out should be included in the leaflet and be separate from the registration form. That would be a sensible way to ensure that we have a clear procedure for sending back the registration form and a second procedure for dealing with opt-out requests. That could be extended to enable people to opt in or out at various times of the year.

The second part of amendment No. 74, which relates to explaining the consequences of exclusion from the register, is to some extent covered by the Minister's arguments about preparing a leaflet. However, the Bill should include provision for explaining the consequences of opting out. Clause 9 makes provision for explaining what the edited register will be used for, but the Bill does not require the regulations to describe the consequences of opting out.

3.45 pm

Amendment No. 75 is important because it would allow people to opt back into the register. The Minister touched on that earlier, but we need clarification about the

[Mr. Allan]

procedures for opting in. We also need a procedure for people to obtain their electoral register data, even though they have not been on the public register.

Problems frequently occur when people who have no credit status seek credit, because a credit company will want to know how many years they have been at their address. The current register is not enough; the company will want three or four years' history. I fear that people who are socially and financially excluded and who have opted out for a number of years will want to get hold of their data to prove to somebody that they were resident at an address for several years.

The Minister should consider whether there should be a procedure whereby a fee is paid, not for instant credit, but for people who want proof of residence at an address. They should be able to go to the electoral registration office and get a statement to prove that they have been on the register for certain years. It is important that somebody who has secretly been on the register for several years should be able to prove that, if it is to their advantage. There is no provision in the Bill for people to do so.

I hope that the Minister will accept that the amendments have been tabled in a positive spirit to try to ensure that we make the most of the Government's plan to have two registers. Both amendments deal with provisions that we should like tightened up before the Report stage.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Amendment No. 22 is a deceptive little amendment. It appears harmless, but its effect could well be to damage electoral registration rates, particularly among young people.

It is a long-standing feature of our electoral registration arrangements that the registration form is completed by the head of the household. That may sound a little old-fashioned, but there are good reasons for continuing with that arrangement. Certainly that is the view of electoral registration officers. First, it significantly reduces the number of forms that officers have to process. Secondly, officers have no other way of knowing when new people move into a household or when children reach voting age. The present arrangement makes the head of the household, who may in practice be any member of it, responsible for ensuring that all eligible people are on the electoral register.

Most importantly, without that arrangement very few of our young people would appear on the electoral register. It is regrettable that so few young people would be bothered to take the initiative to register as electors if left to their own devices, but it is certainly not a fact that we can ignore.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Is the Minister suggesting that people deserve the vote if they cannot even be bothered to take the steps necessary to register? It seems a rather odd argument that we should allow people the great privilege and responsibility of voting but rely on someone else to initiate that process. Surely the first test of eligibility to vote should be simply to ask someone to take the initiative to register, whether they are young or not.

Mr. O'Brien: I know that the right hon. Gentleman and some of his colleagues are in favour of putting tests and obstructions in the way of people who wish to vote, but I suggest that we should seek to encourage people to register. The traditional method of registration, which the right hon. Gentleman's party and mine have supported in the past, is that the head of the household takes responsibility for ensuring that those who are under 18 are included on the electoral register so that when they reach 18, they can vote.

That is a good approach. It ensures the registration of many young people who, for life style and other reasons, may not think that they need to register before they turn 18 so that they can vote if an election occurs shortly after their 18th birthday. We ought to make the procedure easier for them and ensure that the head of the household is able to take on that task.

I hope therefore that the Committee will understand why we must preserve the present arrangement under which the electoral registration form is completed by the head of the household. The amendment would strike at the heart of that principle. The head of a household would never be able to complete a form with an opt-out request on behalf of another member of the household. Anyone who wanted to opt out would need to complete his own form. We would rapidly be moving into a system of individual registration which, for the reasons I have advanced, would be a most undesirable step.

Under the scheme that we envisage, once there is an opt-out box the head of a household will be able to take reasonable steps to ascertain the preferences of other members of the household. In the overwhelming majority of cases that would simply involve asking them.

We recognise, however, that there will be cases where that process is simply not possible. In a student hall of residence, for example, we envisage that the warden might put up a notice saying that he intends to send back the electoral registration form in three weeks' time, and that any resident who wishes to exercise the right to opt out should contact him within that period. There are already provisions in the Bill to the effect that if someone deliberately filled in the form incorrectly, he or she would be committing an offence. There is protection for people who might fear some form of mendacity.

That brings me to amendments Nos. 73 and 74, which were tabled by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan). Under the terms of the first part of amendment No. 74, anyone who wanted to opt out of inclusion on the edited register would need to give his personal approval. So either each individual would need to complete his own form, with all the disadvantages that I have already outlined, or everybody concerned who wanted to opt out would have to sign the same form.

Let us consider the situation of a couple who always decide to exercise their right to opt out. If in one particular year one of the couple happened to be away from home at the time when the electoral registration form was to be completed, that person's partner would not be able to complete the opt-out box on his or her behalf even though he or she was well aware of the preferences of the person concerned. That would be the effect of the amendment, and that does not seem to me to be right.

The second part of amendment No. 74 is unnecessary. As I have already explained, we fully intend to put out a leaflet, to accompany the introduction of the new system,

which will explain the consequences of exercising the right to opt out of inclusion in the edited register. That decision is of importance to all members of a household. Anyone who is head of a household and filling in the form should ensure that he properly consults other members of the household, who may have a view as a result of consequences that may fall on them if the wrong decision is made.

I shall deal briefly with amendment No. 75. I believe that it is unnecessary. It will be open to anyone in respect of whom the box was wrongly ticked, or for whom the box was not ticked although he would have liked it to be, to apply to the registration officer for a correction to be made. We have a rolling register programme, and that is the whole purpose of it.

Amendment No. 90 would delete a provision which allows regulations to be made specifying a form of words for registration officers to use in determining whether people wish their names to be included in the edited register. If there are to be two versions of the register, clearly the electoral registration form needs to explain how people can go about deciding whether they wish to exercise their right to be included in the edited register. We think that a uniform approach to this is needed, which is why the provision which the amendments seeks to delete was included in the Bill. Indeed, the amendment would insert a provision allowing for a form of words to be specified for the purpose of explaining to people how to go about getting their names excluded from the edited register. I cannot see what advantages that offers over and above the provisions that are set out in the Bill.

I do not believe that any of the amendments would improve the Bill and I hope that, given the reasons that I have advanced, hon. Members will decide to withdraw them.

Mr. Greenway: I am not a lawyer and the Minister is. My reading of new paragraph 10(1) in clause 9(2) is wholly different from that of the Government. I do not believe for a second that our amendment would have the adverse consequence that he suggests. Given that the Committee wishes to make progress, and that we have made our point, perhaps we can return to the matter on Report. I do not believe his explanation about the head of the household and the ticking of boxes. I am even more confused about wardens of university colleges explaining whether people will have the box ticked or not. I am not sure whether that explanation was entirely accurate.

In the light of what the Minister said earlier about his willingness to accept amendment No. 21, I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment No. 22.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment made: No. 21, in page 10, line 32, after "which", insert—

"both the full register and".—[*Mr. Greenway.*]

Amendment proposed: No. 91, in page 10, line 42, at end insert—

"(ab) to supply to any persons registered under the 1998 Data Protection Act copies of the full register and other documents, or prescribed parts of them, on payment of a prescribed fee and for exempt purposes only"—[*Mr. Greenway.*]

The Committee divided: Ayes 157, Noes 287.

Division No. 26] **[3.56 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice & Howden)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*

Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Eleanor Laing and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda
(Edinburgh Pentlands)
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry
(B'ham Hodge H)
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie
(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny
(Wolverh'ton SW)
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle
(B'ham Yardley)
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine
(Morecambe & Lunesdale)
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann
(Dewsbury)
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan
(Swansea W)

Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mrs. Anne McGuire.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question proposed, That the clause, as amended, stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Allan: I want to follow up a point that was made when we considered amendments Nos. 77 and 78 about whether data derived from the register can be disclosed to a third party. Political parties currently process data and create delivery lists that state, for example, that a road contains 40 houses, of which the even numbers are two to 20 and the odd numbers are one to 21. That data is used for our purposes and passed on to charities, which use it as a free source of information for their collectors. It is not used for direct access to individuals; it is simply a free source of useful data. The Minister said earlier that he did not understand why the amendments had been tabled, so I have tried to explain. Can he confirm that we will be able to continue to use the data within the regulations? I emphasise that we provide only information that has been derived from the register. Does he support that?

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman asks me the same question as Bill Powell from Atherstone in my constituency. He is also a Liberal Democrat. As I have told him and the Committee, the proposal deserves a sympathetic response. We can deal with the matter through regulations. The hon. Gentleman suggests that it should be permitted to pass on essentially statistical information to charities. I have sympathy for that approach and I believe that we can find ways in which to achieve that. I hope that the matter can be tackled later through regulations and that I shall be able to satisfy him.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 10

Pilot Schemes

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I beg to move amendment No. 26, in page 11, line 37, at end insert—

"(1A) No local authority shall submit a scheme to the Secretary of State unless it has consulted with electors and other interested persons in its area on the scheme for a period of at least 28 days prior to the submission of the scheme, and the authority shall submit to the Secretary of State any responses received during the consultation period.

(1B) No local authority shall submit a scheme to the Secretary of State unless the scheme has been approved by a meeting of the authority, with at least two-thirds of the members present and voting being in favour of the submission of the scheme to the Secretary of State.".

The clause could lead to the most fundamental change for many years in the way in which we vote. We join the Minister in his desire, about which he spoke yesterday, to preserve the integrity of the voting system. The provision deals with the way in which local authorities will submit plans for pilot projects for new forms of voting or counting votes—or both—in their areas or parts of their areas at local elections in England and Wales.

Turnouts at local elections are derisory in parts of this country. There is a crisis of democracy in local elections. However, I suspect that the changes that we are considering today will only partially correct the decline. More needs to be done to tackle the real reasons for voter apathy. Statistics show that, in metropolitan boroughs, the turnout declined from 33 per cent. in 1973 to 26 per cent. last year, and from 40 per cent. to 37 per cent. in the English districts during the same period. In only three years, the English unitary authorities have seen a decline in voting to less than one third of the electorate.

4.15 pm

Mr. Forth: I hope that, as my hon. Friend develops his argument, he will elaborate on whether he believes that people do not vote at the moment because it is inconvenient or difficult for them to get to the polling station, because they are positively abstaining, or because they simply cannot be bothered. The analysis of the reasons for differing turnouts is crucial to deciding whether the clause is valid.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that intervention. As I said earlier, the decline in voting is due to several reasons. The changes that we make today may alter the turnout at local elections only slightly. The Government are examining why people do not vote in local government elections. I believe that people get frustrated when they vote for their local councillors who vote against planning applications only for the local authority's decision to be overturned by an inspector from Bristol, against the democratic wishes of the people who voted for the councillors. At the last local elections, at least one elector told me that that was the specific reason for her decision not to vote. There are several reasons for abstaining, including positive abstention and apathy. The Bill will at least remove one of the obstacles that prevents people from voting at local elections.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): While we are considering pilot schemes and consultation, is not it a good idea for the Committee to embolden itself to demand a proper restoration of the powers of self-government, even if only as a pilot scheme, to maximise participation—

The Temporary Chairman: Order. I am sure that the Committee has no difficulty in emboldening itself. However, we might astonish ourselves by sticking to the amendment.

Mr. Evans: Yesterday, I treated the Committee to a resumé of my dismal results at parliamentary elections. Today, I can correct that by relating some of my local government election results, which are slightly better than my parliamentary results—a 50 per cent. success rate. I do not blame electoral procedures for my derisory results. In the United Kingdom, we are all used to voting in local elections on Thursdays between 8 am and 9 pm, and using a pencil on a piece of paper at a prescribed polling station, which is usually a school. The ballot

[Mr. Evans]

papers are pooled in a given place and counted manually. A winner—increasingly, a Conservative—is announced, and thus elected as a councillor.

The clause provides for changes to the system that are potentially wide ranging. Amendment No. 26 would ensure that the pilot schemes not only had the consent of the Home Secretary but that they had been fully considered and that local people had been fully consulted. We are in favour of the pilot schemes, but we have reservations about some of the suggestions for them. We support sensible suggestions for making voting easier. However, I stress that we must be careful not to facilitate fraudulent voting.

The changes could lead to ballot boxes being taken to places of work—completely outside polling stations. They could also be taken to remote areas where only a few people live and a polling station would not usually be manned. When I was in Australia more than a year ago, we stopped at a small place called Paralchino, where only 11 people live. The ballot box is taken to them, they vote and the ballot box is taken away. One of the pilot schemes may be run along those lines.

Ballot boxes could be taken from polling stations to residential or nursing homes, where we know there are specific problems in enabling elderly people to vote. It has been suggested that polling booths might be placed in supermarkets so that people are able to vote while shopping. Voting hours could also be further extended from those I have mentioned, or the number of days over which a poll takes place could be increased to two or perhaps even three or more. One suggestion is that all-postal ballots might, in certain places, replace the traditional polling booth. The pencil could be replaced by electronic voting—

The Temporary Chairman: Order. That is all very interesting, but the amendment is specific and relates to pilot schemes.

Mr. Evans: Yes, Mrs. Dunwoody. I am discussing the variety of pilot schemes and the fundamental changes that they will achieve. The Secretary of State will be given powers and, once schemes have taken place, will be able to introduce those changes throughout the country at general, European and a number of other elections. Those fundamental changes will be tested in the pilots and we want to make absolutely certain that they are tested properly within the local authority areas, that local authorities consult fully with the people in their areas over 28 days and that, as proposed new subsection (1B) states, a scheme has "at least two-thirds" support in the authority.

The White Paper "Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People" states:

> "The Government must safeguard the integrity of elections and ensure that any experiments do not lead to an increase in electoral fraud."

That is what we are concerned about. It continues:

> "Experiments would therefore have to be sanctioned by the Government. In some cases it would work directly with chosen councils to develop the rules for an experiment."

I am sure that the Minister will want to address the anxieties of, for example, the Local Government Association about ensuring that sufficient pilots take place and that he will take on board the concern that they should have local popular support. Speed is of the essence and I believe that the Government are keen to get the pilots up and running for the local elections.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

The Temporary Chairman: Order. The amendment concerns consultation and I hope that we shall have a general debate on that, not the pilot schemes.

Mr. Evans: Thank you, Mrs. Dunwoody. I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow).

Mr. Bercow: On consultation and popular opinion, to which my hon. Friend has alluded, would he be kind enough to tell me and the Committee how many representations he has received from constituents in Ribble Valley in support of the principle or practice of such pilot schemes? It is important to demonstrate the degree of public interest.

Mr. Evans: There are elections in Ribble Valley every four years and the next ones will not take place for some time. The pilot schemes will take place this year and next so Ribble Valley will not be involved. Hon. Members will make their own decisions about the popular support for the schemes, but I support the Government's intention to widen the franchise, which is why we need to ensure that voting is made easier. At the same time, fraudulent voting must not be made easier, which is why we are asking the Secretary of State, through the amendment, to ensure that proper consultation takes place with local people.

Mr. Mark Fisher (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): May I help the hon. Gentleman? Was he suggesting no representations—a nil return? Is that what he was trying to say?

Mr. Evans: Yes, that is right. A pilot scheme is unlikely to take place in my area because there will not be elections for at least another two years, which is why I would not expect the people of Ribble Valley to write to me asking for one. None the less, elections will take place in May in more than 150 local authority areas and may be taking place in the hon. Gentleman's area.

Mr. Fisher: The hon. Gentleman might be interested to know that I have not received a single inquiry along those lines, and I rather doubt that any other Member of the House has.

The Temporary Chairman: Order. Those are important points that can be made on clause stand part. We are talking about consultation and I am sure that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) is about to return to it.

Mr. Evans: The points that have been drawn out by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher) reinforce our amendment. We are asking that the local authorities consult positively with people in their areas. When we discussed amendments concerning reducing the voting age from 18 to 16 I said that I had received no

letters from constituents on that matter, but I was told that that did not really matter and that what was right was important. Making it easier for people to vote is right, but we must achieve that in such a way that we are not making it easier for people to vote fraudulently.

I hope that the Minister takes on board the fact that we are seeking a consensus on the pilots. We can achieve that by ensuring that the local authorities, at least 28 days before the pilots are submitted to the Secretary of State, positively seek the opinions of the people and organisations in their areas on the suggestions that they are making. In respect of proposed new subsection (1B), we are seeking the same sort of consensus that there is on the changes. Local authorities would have to hold a vote. We are seeking two-thirds approval for a pilot submitted by an authority to the Secretary of State, which would clearly show that there was a consensus in that authority.

We appreciate that the changes that could result from the pilot schemes might be fundamental. Indeed, the hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) himself talked about the "wide-ranging powers" that would be conferred on the Secretary of State, saying that

"we have become rather used to those with this rather autocratic Government".—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1999; Vol. 337, c. 553.]

We ought to be more concerned about that. I hope that the Minister can reassure the Committee that, although he may not be able to accept our amendment, he will at least look at it again to ensure that we achieve proper consensus on the pilots.

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am most grateful to be called to speak on this matter and I hope to be brief. I know that you, Mrs. Dunwoody, will put me in my place immediately if I stray too far into general principles.

I understand fully that one of the evils to be remedied is fraudulent voting, but the other matter about which one has to be cautious is the politically motivated stationing of polling booths or mechanisms for attracting voters that will favour one party or faction as opposed to another. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) mentioned the possibility of siting a polling station by a factory, but local people would know very well that siting a polling station by factory A may produce a different result from siting one outside stockbroker office B. Placing a polling booth by a certain railway station would produce a different equation from placing it by another station. I hope, therefore, that local authorities will consult not 28 days before submitting a scheme, but way before. I should have thought that any responsible local authority would take soundings well in advance of publishing a scheme.

There is a second aspect to the amendment, which concerns a two-thirds majority being obtained at the local district council meeting. Surely such a provision would virtually block any progress on a pilot scheme, except in authorities where there was an overwhelming majority. Even the events that are occurring now are leading to different political consequences in polling stations; it would be very surprising if a two-thirds majority on councils that were controlled overwhelmingly by one party led to a consensus.

I cannot support the amendment in its present form, but I hope that the spirit of consultation, and of soundings before the implementation of the scheme, will be adopted by all responsible local authorities.

4.30 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I support the amendment in general terms, but I think it important for us to ensure that proper consultation takes place before pilot schemes are adopted. If we are to engage people in the democratic process and ensure that those people think that our measures are not gimmicks but are for real, we must be certain that the water has been tested.

Let me share with the Committee an experience that I still have far too often, and find very frustrating. I hear of proposals from local authority officers which, before any consultation has taken place, have been presented to the public. Although the proposals have come from their own officers, councils often are not told the details, and Members of Parliament frequently are not consulted.

There ought to be a process to deal with that. I welcome the idea of a pilot scheme, and I know that the Minister is aware that I have a positive approach to the Bill as a whole; but I think it important for enough people to have been consulted to give the idea some credibility and credence. It should not be seen as the whim of someone who has had a wheeze of an idea. If we are to modernise and update the system, we do not want to experience lots of failures. When the pilots have happened, we shall not want to hear that no one voted and that it was not a good idea.

The general purpose of the amendment is that ideas should be presented on the basis of popular support, that those ideas should be tested and that they should then be validated.

Mr. Grieve: Consultation with local authorities is highly variable. It can range from what could be described as full consultation to consultation in circumstances that have often led me to believe that the consultation has been stage-managed with the aim of achieving the desired results. Is not that an argument for also introducing a mechanism to ensure that, at council level, such changes cannot be implemented without more than a 50:50 consensus?

Mr. Hughes: I am sympathetic to that point. The genesis of the Bill lay in a working party in which the Government tried, entirely reasonably, to achieve consensus. The Bill resulted from the consensus that was achieved; proposals that did not achieve consensus are not in the Bill, because they merit a different process.

I am sympathetic to the argument advanced by the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve). Specifically, I want all local councils and parties to be consulted as a matter of course. The hon. Gentleman's constituency contains a district authority and a county authority. I believe that, in areas where that is the case, both tiers should be consulted. In fact, I think that there should be only one authority, and that Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament should be involved automatically.

Guarantees should be included in the Bill. There should be certainty about the process: for instance, a minimum time should be specified for consultation. The other day, a consultation in London began on 15 December, with a closing date of 4 January. The consultation dealt with a Government proposal about expenses for the mayor of London. It was hardly geared to maximise public

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participation and response; indeed, some of us were sceptical about the idea that the aim had been maximum public participation.

Guarantees are needed. We have all been victims of consultations that have started on 31 July when the deadline has been 6 September. I do not want to labour the point, but I think that the general view is that the Minister should reassure us that either the law or secondary legislation—regulations—will deliver what we want.

Mr. Forth: I do not agree with the thrust of this part of the Bill, and I regret to say that I do not share the enthusiasm expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans).

I am slightly reassured by the fact that the wording of the clause that the amendment is intended to alter provides a safeguard before we rush headlong into unnecessary change, but I will keep most of what I want to say in reserve for the stand part debate, which an earlier occupant of the Chair suggested would be appropriate for wider discussion.

As I understand it, nothing can happen unless or until the relevant local authorities have submitted proposals to the Secretary of State. That is useful from my point of view, because I suspect that it will mean that nothing will happen at all in many parts of the country, which I think is a very good thing—I see no reason for these changes. The proposals would then have to be approved by the Secretary of State. I suppose that they might be defective, and the Secretary of State might see fit not to approve them, so there is another possible safeguard there. The Secretary of State would then make an order, and so on.

There is a certain safeguard against what I regard as unnecessary change in any case. I believe that voting is entirely practicable now for citizens who wish to cast their votes, and that there is no need for extraordinary or even bizarre measures to induce people to vote.

I consider the amendment to be defective in a number of ways. I am very unhappy about new section (1A). As my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) has pointed out, it makes a vague reference to consultation with electors. I consider the changes envisaged in the Bill and, indeed, in the amendment to be so fundamental and so radical as to require much more support and reassurance than is provided by consultation with electors, in the loose sense in which it is proposed in the amendment. Surely it should be demonstrated that a significant proportion of voters in an area are enthusiastic about the idea of pilot schemes that will begin to change something as fundamental to our democratic process as our electoral system, rather than mere consultation.

We all know—those of us who were in government until two and a half years ago, and those of us who are now in government—how variable the consultation process can be. We know how meaningful and, indeed, how meaningless it can be. I am sorry to say this to my colleagues who have signed the amendment, but I do not believe that the proposed approach to consultation provides anything like the reassurance that should enable us to embark on changes as radical as those proposed in the Bill.

I am, however, more reassured by what is proposed in the proposed new subsection (1B). I am reassured by the higher hurdle involved. The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) suggested that the hurdle was too high; I consider it to be appropriately high. I think that our electorate will be reassured if we require visible, palpable, substantial support before taking these steps towards change. I think that the proposed subsection (1B) gives that, but that subsection (1A) falls short of what is required.

I am in a dilemma about the amendment. I do not support clause 10 but I shall return to that later. I would like to support subsection (1B), but I am very unhappy about subsection (1A). I suppose the only conclusion I can draw is that, as it goes further in the direction that I would like from the original wording, I am prepared to support it on that basis. I believe, however, that we need far more safeguards and reassurances before plunging headlong down the path proposed in clause 10.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): I support the amendment merely because it makes a bad clause slightly better. I am genuinely concerned about clause 10, which has the potential to create a right shambles throughout the country as different authorities produce different ideas on voting and present different schemes to the Secretary of State.

With the best will in the world, how will the Home Office know whether a proposal by X authority in some part of the country is properly thought out, properly workable, fair and will not lead to a polling booth being situated outside a factory that employs, say, 500 people? It may sound eminently sensible, but it may stack the voting in the ward one way. If the mobile polling station were put outside a school where mothers pick up children in a different part of the ward, there might be a totally different result.

Therefore, there are grave dangers in allowing local authorities to come [illegible] with their own ideas and schemes on how to increase votes in their area. They may not be widening the franchise generally, but be planning to stack votes in favour of a particular party in a local authority area.

It is not good enough for the Bill to say that the scheme must be approved by the Secretary of State. If local authorities have written the scheme cleverly and put in all the correct buzz words and phrases about fair and impartial voting, the Home Office will not spot it, unless it gets a big staff increase and can go around every local authority area to check in detail its proposals for mobile voting, or for whatever local quirk that they wish to introduce. That is my worry about the Bill.

If the Government want to increase voting opportunities by putting polling stations in shops, supermarkets and, in that case, rural post offices—

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The right hon. Gentleman is talking about various pilot schemes and new systems. The amendment deals with consultation and approval. I should be grateful if he would stick to that.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful for the reminder, Mr. Lord. I was trying to set the scene and to say why, if the Government were to create a hotchpotch of systems

throughout the country, consultation before local authorities sent a scheme to the Home Office would be vital.

There is only one safeguard in the Bill: after a local authority comes up with a scheme, the rest of the electorate have to depend on the Home Office and the Secretary of State to say, "No, that is a bit dodgy. We do not like it. The proposals are faulty. We will send them back and reject it." The amendment suggests that there must be widespread consultation locally. It could identify difficult, bogus, fraudulent schemes, and schemes that have not been properly thought out, or may be politically biased.

I do not think that any hon. Member would trust every local authority to come up with foolproof schemes without some bias. There are about 400 local authorities. With the best will in the world, some of them, somewhere, will make mistakes. The schemes of some may be politically motivated. The amendment proposes consultation. That may identify to local people what the authority is up to and prevent some dodgy schemes being presented to the Secretary of State as if they were all legitimate and above board.

I support the proposal for two-thirds majority votes, although I am not generally in favour of them; I believe that, on most occasions, a simple majority is sufficient. However, in view of the way in which the Government are, in some ways, putting the cart before the horse with their proposals, I favour subsection (1B) and two-thirds majority voting.

I would have preferred it if the Government, in going down the route of having lots of different schemes throughout the country for different systems of voting, had put into the Bill clear principles and guidelines on how it should be done, a list and schedule of appropriate places and the safeguards to be built in. They could then have invited local authorities to produce proposals that met those guidelines and criteria. In those circumstances, I would have been happier, but, as the Government have gone down the route of inviting local authorities to invent any scheme that they wish, with the Home Office then arbitrating, it is vital both to have widespread consultation locally and to ensure that there is a public vote in the local authority, with a two-thirds majority. In that way, we can be assured that the majority of elected representatives locally are happy with the proposals that are sent to the Home Office.

4.45 pm

Mr. Grieve: When the scheme first came before the House on Second Reading, I broadly supported it. It was one of the clauses that I thought was fairly creative. I thought that because I accept that there are ways in which our voting methods may be improved, but, picking up the points that have already been made—I do not want to repeat, or to labour, them too much—the merit of the present system is that it is essentially completely depoliticised.

Looking back over what is now, I suppose, 20 years of involvement in local politics before even becoming a Member of Parliament, I can think of no occasion when the siting of polling stations, for example, was a contentious issue. The whole thing is so enshrined in the tradition that it is handled simply by the chief executive's department in the local authority. In my experience, it has not been questioned.

There must be some anxiety that, if we embark on an action that encourages local authorities, at what is essentially a political level, to come up with pilot schemes on how voting may be improved, there will be ulterior motives, as was touched on by the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst). That causes me concern. I leave aside whether moving the polling station to a new location that appears to favour one party or another will lead to a different result. The provision may mean that what has never been questioned will suddenly be questioned. I can foresee that, on the Floor of the House, Members will say to Home Office Ministers that there is gerrymandering of polling station sitings, for example. When I considered the matter on Second Reading, that did not hit me in the face. It was only when I reflected on it afterwards that I could see the dangers inherent in such a change.

I do not want to pull the rug from under any change because I accept, as I said on Second Reading, that innovatory ideas may be beneficial, but we need to be careful because, as we know, there are local authorities throughout the country, not necessarily represented by one political party, whose motives are often questioned. Those will precisely be the places where most questions will be asked about any changes. It is vital, therefore, that some local consensus should be achieved.

As I told the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), local authority consultations are variable things, and some of them are scandalous. It is not unusual to have a local authority consultation in which, notwithstanding the fact that a majority of individuals have expressed view A, the local authority—by use of some extraordinary, creative statistics—nevertheless decides that its idea, which was in favour of view B, should still be given a go. The Home Secretary will then have to make various difficult decisions, and politicise what had previously been a non-political process.

I should be interested to hear from any other hon. Member in the debate whether, hitherto, the siting of polling stations in their constituencies—which tends to be long-established in local schools—has caused major political problems. I cannot think of any examples of that happening, but I should be interested to hear whether it has.

The proposal might open Pandora's box.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman and I are far apart in our general views on the issue. However, proper consultation on the fairly limited issue of polling stations is necessary when one is told categorically, "We must have a polling station for each polling district," although the logical and cost-effective place for those people—in district A—to vote is just across the road, in district B, where most of them live. There are important issues to address.

I therefore agree with the hon. Gentleman that general ground rules on minimum consultation time and on informing people should be established and not left entirely—with no checking or authorisation—to local authority discretion.

Mr. Grieve: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman. I also support amendment No. 26. It is not perfect—various flaws have been identified—but perfection in the matter cannot be achieved.

[Mr. Grieve]

Clause 10, as drafted, worries me. The last thing that I want is, in four or five years, the House being dominated at Question Time or at other times by arguments over alleged gerrymandering as a consequence of changes to something that had previously been accepted, without question and without anxiety, as a matter of routine. It is not a matter simply of improving, but of public perception.

The issue is non-contentious, but we are possibly about to make it contentious, and that does not seem to be particularly desirable. Let us ensure that the benefits that may come out of the proposal—possibly, for example, different voting hours or ways of casting a vote—are not clouded by the politicisation of a process that has hitherto been non-political.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): I am pleased to tell the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) that I have some sympathy with the first half of amendment No. 26. My support for the amendment is probably—and appropriately—in direct proportion to the opposition to it expressed by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth).

Clearly, it would be undesirable if local authorities were to operate pilot schemes that were contrary to, or out of tune with, the wishes of the local electorate. However, for reasons that I shall explain in a moment, including in the legislation an explicit requirement to consult seems unnecessary. When any pilot scheme is being considered or designed, and given certain guarantees and conditions, we have to trust local elected representatives to be aware of, and to represent—that is why they are elected—the interests of those who elect them.

My colleagues at the Home Office recently issued one of their regular circulars to local authorities, part of which dealt with the operation of the Bill and the application process for authorities that are interested in operating schemes. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean)—who not only spoke in the debate, but served at the Home Office in the previous Government—will know that such circulars are issued fairly regularly.

The circular makes it clear that only applications that are well thought out and planned will be approved by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. In deciding which schemes meet those criteria, he will be looking for evidence that the application commands the confidence and support of local people. If he feels that a scheme is inappropriate and would not command the local population's sympathy, he would automatically rule it to be inappropriate. An application to run a pilot scheme that obviously does not have the support of local people would, in those circumstances, have little or no chance of being successful.

We should leave it to local authorities to decide how to meet the requirement. They might want to engage in formal consultation over 28 days or some other period; they might want to send people knocking on doors; or they might want to place articles in local papers and invite comments on them. It is for each local authority to consider the best way of advertising and receiving views on their proposals. I hope that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley accepts that consultation will be integral to any pilot scheme, so there should be no need for the first part of his amendment, although the principle behind it is good.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) and my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) touched on issues relating to the location of polling stations and the effect that it could have on the outcome of an election. Local authorities already have the power to designate polling stations, and an appeals mechanism can be invoked by electors who believe that the local authority has failed to exercise that duty properly. The Bill does not change that. If there are suspicions of mischief or gerrymandering—a word that the hon. Member for Beaconsfield used, perhaps in the heat of the moment—it is open to any elector, including members of political parties who feel that the situation is disadvantaging a section of the electorate, to appeal against the siting of a polling station.

Mr. Grieve: How often are such complaints made or upheld under the existing rules? My experience is that the process is wholly depoliticised and I am anxious that it should remain so.

Mr. Howarth: I have no global statistics on the number of appeals, but I have experience of it happening. My local party once felt that a mobile polling station was inappropriately sited. On one occasion, we protested about its inaccessibility for people with disabilities. I understand from the global statistics that are available that such appeals are rare, which leads me to believe that the system is probably run fairly.

I stand to be corrected, but I think that it was Winston Churchill who said that a majority of one was enough. That principle has applied at every level of government. I clearly remember the previous Government often surviving perilous situations by one vote. On one occasion, they did not even survive by one vote, but overnight they were able to reverse that. We accept the principle that a simple majority is all that is required for even the most momentous legislation to pass through this House. The same is true in local government. I see no reason to depart from that principle for pilot schemes.

Arguably the most important decision that a local authority takes each year is to set its budget. I speak as a former local authority finance committee chairman. Fortunately, on Knowsley council the majority in the vote on the budget was never likely to be as small as one. That is in the nature of the psephology of the situation. If I had ever had to get the budget through by one vote, that would have been enough. Why should we treat pilot schemes any differently?

5 pm

I want to draw attention to the criteria that local authorities might be expected to consider when proposing schemes as they might be relevant in respect of consultation. It might be for the convenience of the Committee if I refer hon. Members to Home Office RPA circular 430. I am assured that a copy was sent to the

Opposition parties, although I do not know whether it has filtered down to the relevant spokesmen. Paragraph 31 of the document states:

"An application to run a pilot scheme must be made to the Home Secretary and must include the following information".

It then lists 11 pieces of information. I shall read out the last two.

Sub-paragraph 10 states:

"Details of the arrangements that will be made to evaluate the pilot scheme".

It will be the responsibility of the local authority operating each individual pilot scheme to submit an evaluation of the effect of the scheme. It will obviously include such factors as turnout. If a pilot scheme operated in a way that was unexpected or unfair, that should feature in the evaluation. So those who are concerned about any mischief being made should accept the professionalism of electoral registration officers and others involved in elections in submitting an objective and honest evaluation of the pilot schemes.

Sub-paragraph 11 states:

"An assurance that no voter will be put at a disadvantage by the proposed innovation, that the opportunities for fraud will not be enhanced and that the secrecy of the poll will be maintained."

There are other requirements involving such details as the name and the minutes of the council approving the scheme, so I shall not go through them exhaustively.

I hope that the circular, the process in which it involves local authorities and the fact that they need to evaluate any pilot scheme objectively and inform the Home Office of its outcome will assure the Committee that, although the amendments provided the opportunity for a useful debate, they are not necessary. I hope that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley will feel it in his power to withdraw them.

Mr. Evans: This has been a useful debate on two major issues: consultation and the pilot schemes. As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) pointed out, consultation can be defined in many ways. That is why the amendment is prescriptive and proposes that consultation should continue for at least 28 days.

I was a local councillor in opposition in West Glamorgan. The local authority had to consult widely before setting its budget. It seemed to be a matter of getting the businesses in and letting them have their say before jacking up the rates to tremendous levels. At least the authority could argue that local businesses had been consulted. We are looking for meaningful consultation on these changes. The pilot schemes represent a major constitutional change affecting voting. Local authorities are not the only ones who are guilty of poor consultation; so were the present Government and past Government in various respects.

The second part of the amendment, concerning thresholds, relates to clause 11, which transfers enormous powers to the Home Secretary. Once clause 10 has been implemented and the pilots have been approved, the Secretary of State can introduce those changes throughout the country. General election results could change on the basis of what might happen in the pilots described in clause 10. We therefore want to make certain that the pilots are subject to proper consultation and that consensus is achieved in the local authority area, to be demonstrated by a vote in favour by two thirds of the local authority councillors present and voting.

I also hope that the Home Secretary will feel able to publish the results of the pilot schemes, so that we have an opportunity to see exactly what is intended and where, and can make our own judgments.

Mr. George Howarth: I can confirm that the Home Secretary intends to publish the results.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that assurance, because we will all take a keen interest in the progress of the pilot schemes and how they are evaluated in different areas. I understand that local authorities are already consulting on pilot schemes to be put forward to the Home Secretary for the May 2000 elections. The time scale will be very tight, even though consideration of the Bill is proceeding apace here and in the other place. We want to be sure that the consultation will be thorough, so we will wish to ensure before proceedings are concluded that all local authorities will be well aware that the Home Secretary will examine all pilot projects to see what consultation took place before the proposals were submitted. However, I know that the Minister is not keen to see that requirement included in the Bill. With the assurances he has given, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 18, in page 12, line 2, at end insert—

'(2A) Where a scheme under this section makes provision for voting in a particular election to take place on more than one day, it shall be an offence for any person to make public, at any time before all voting in the election concerned has been completed, information which indicates or purports to indicate the way in which two or more persons have cast their votes in that election.

(2B) A person guilty of an offence under subsection (2A) of this section is liable, on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding Level 5 on the Standard Scale, or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to both.'.

We aim to ensure the integrity of the ballot, and our amendment would prevent the publication of any exit poll that could affect the outcome of an election. Let us suppose that an election were to be held over two days, as the pilot schemes could allow. On the first day, exit polls could be conducted by various organisations for their own purposes, including media of all types, and the results could be published at the end of the day. If those polls indicated a trend in the voting, they could influence the final result.

We have all experienced the way in which the Liberal Democrats conduct their own polls during elections and publish the results in leaflets that claim that they are closing the gap on the party in first place. They do that to try to influence the outcome of the vote. We do not seek to prevent such skulduggery, but we do wish to prevent exit polls that arise from actual voting. We have information from the Library about other countries that have banned polling for various periods before elections take place. France is one of the best examples, because it has banned polling for two weeks while elections take place over two Sundays.

Polls can be suspect at the best of times and I am sure that we all remember warmly the uselessness of the exit polling in the 1992 general election. If the exit poll had

[Mr. Evans]

been released before the voting had finished, people might have been induced to vote differently because of what they perceived the possible result to be. The amendment would ensure that bogus exit polls—and even accurate ones—would play no part in the election process. We want people to vote on the issues of the campaign, not on inside information.

Mr. Maclean: This is another amendment that attempts to tighten up a piece of nonsense in the Bill. The idea that we need to allow more than one day for voting in local authority elections is preposterous. Polling stations are open for a minimum of 14 hours for local government elections. A 30 per cent. turnout is achieved, at the expense of great disruption to schools, especially primary schools, which lose a day of lessons because they are open for electoral purposes.

Mr. George Howarth: The right hon. Gentleman may know that the Home Office often receives representations from people who are called away on urgent business on the day of an election. There is no opportunity for them to cast a vote, as they do not have time to apply for postal votes or proxy votes. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that reasonable?

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order. We are not debating whether there should be voting on one or more days. We are debating whether, if there is voting on one or more days, there should be exit polls.

Mr. Maclean: That is it exactly, Mr. Lord. To answer the Minister, I shall have to return to the matter in the clause stand part debate. It is very easy for people to get a postal vote these days if they anticipate that they may be called away. People can get a postal vote automatically for lots of reasons these days, whether or not they intend to be away on the day of an election.

The amendment would improve slightly what is a nonsense in the Bill. I do not believe that exit polls, or opinion polls in general, should be banned. In countries where that has been tried, secret party polls and other information are still available days in advance and can influence voters. The Government propose that polling stations should be open for two days in a bid to raise turnout from 30 per cent. to 31 per cent. That is nonsense: it is dead easy to vote, but 70 per cent. of the public cannot be bothered. However, if the aim is to get those idle people out to vote, we need to adopt the proposal in the amendment.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I do not have share the strident opinion of the electorate expressed by the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). I believe that anything that might increase election turnout is worth experimenting with.

I support the idea that the process should be regulated. In America, polls close on one coast long before they do on the other coast. The influence exerted by Vermont on California—if I have got that the right way around—is always an issue.

Mr. Forth: What about Hawaii?

Mr. Hughes: We must not forget Hawaii, of course. When the Minister responds, I hope that he will answer a question about postal votes. They are often counted earlier than those cast in the ballot box, although they can be submitted right up until the polls close. However, if we are to regulate as proposed in the amendment, we must cover the relatively small number of votes counted and attested before the main count.

Perhaps the answer should be that, regardless of how early votes are cast, no counting is begun until all votes are in. Before the count starts, we would need to ensure that only a verification exercise was undertaken, not a counting exercise. It would not be helpful if a survey of those who voted in the first two days of an election showed that one party was 50 per cent. ahead. That would influence the result, and I hope that the Committee would not support that proposition.

Mr. Forth: I echo the sentiments expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), but in a slightly different way. The mere fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) has tabled the amendment and that we have had this debate illustrates the difficulties inherent in this section of the Bill. If we were not having to debate the nonsense of spreading voting over a period of time or, as we shall come to, a number of different places, we would not have to consider safeguards.

5.15 pm

One of the beauties—the elegance, the simplicity—of our long-established electoral arrangements is that they are familiar. That in itself undermines the argument that somehow it is difficult to vote and that we should make it easier. However, what is perhaps even more important in the context of this amendment is that the simplicity, elegance and transparency of our existing arrangements makes them, if not foolproof, then proof against the kind of dangers that previous speakers have described. That should act as yet another warning signal that we are treading a dangerous path. We are proposing tinkering and experimenting with long-standing established arrangements in something as fundamental and crucial as our electoral process and voting procedures. That should give us pause for thought and, perhaps, should discourage us from proceeding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley has identified this danger, for which I praise him. However, I believe that a measure such as this is essential to prevent abuse of the new processes on which we may now be embarking. If local authorities, having jumped the hurdles that we discussed, go down this route, it will be incumbent on us to anticipate any difficulties that may arise and eliminate or reduce them as far as possible. However, the mere fact that we are worrying about safeguards illustrates the dangers of what is being proposed.

I support my hon. Friend's amendment, and will come back to the other matters on clause stand part.

Mr. George Howarth: I shall be brief, and hope that I can satisfy the Committee. When he moved the amendment, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) referred to bogus polls.

Mr. Evans: Some bogus polls.

Mr. Howarth: Indeed. I draw the Committee's attention to a poll that was published by the Liberal Democrats in my constituency prior to the 1997 general election.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Your friends.

Mr. Howarth: My friends indeed. The poll told the electors, who I think had more sense than to take any notice, that my majority was on a knife edge, and that the Liberal Democrat candidate would be likely to displace me come polling day. I am glad to say that they were wrong—I had a majority of more than 26,000 votes.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I always warn my colleagues about the dangers of exaggeration.

Mr. Howarth: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman gives that advice, but I note that he does not always take it himself.

I am attracted by the arguments of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley. My colleagues at the Home Office are minded, given his agreement to withdraw the amendment, to take the issue away and look at it. There is some potential for distorting the outcome of an election in these circumstances. The amendment contains a sensible principle, and we need to address it. I also give an undertaking to address the point that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) raised about postal votes.

Mr. Evans: I am encouraged by what the Minister said. I am not persuaded by double-day voting, but the reality of the pilot is that some may be introduced. In that case, we need to ensure that there are safeguards. I am more persuaded by the proposal of the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), which we shall debate later, to make the cut-off dates in respect of matters such as postal voting far shorter, therefore obviating the need for the expensive double-voting procedures.

In the light of the Minister's assurances, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 19, in page 12, line 2, at end insert—

"(2C) Where a scheme under this section makes provision for voting in a particular election to take place on more than one day or to take place at places other than polling stations, any person voting in the election concerned shall be required, as a condition of voting, to produce at the place of voting at least one item of documentary evidence of that person's identity.

(2D) The items of documentary evidence required for the purposes of subsection (2C) of this section shall be any of—

(a) a valid United Kingdom passport;

(b) a valid United Kingdom driving licence;

(c) a printed statement from a bank or building society authorised to do business in the United Kingdom dated not more than 28 days before the day on which voting in the election commences;

(d) a copy of any of the foregoing certified by a commissioner for oaths,

or such other document as may in the reasonable opinion of the registration officer concerned constitute sufficient evidence of the identity of the person referred to in subsection (2C) of this section.".

The amendment is consequential on voting taking place over more than one day or in more than one polling station. It is a common-sense measure that will help to reduce the incidence of fraudulent voting, at a time when we want to simplify the voting system.

Yesterday, we held a good debate on proofs of identity when making declarations of locality. The amendment builds on that. We heard that personation is a reality, although we do not know the exact rate at which it occurs. I hope that the Government will carry out a study of that matter as soon as possible. In evaluating the pilots, local authorities could compare personation before and during the pilots. In any event, some work must be undertaken.

In making voting easier, we want to ensure that the integrity of the vote is preserved. Currently, anyone can stroll up to a polling station and state who they are. They need no proof; they do not need to show documentation or a polling card. Amendment No. 19 provides that voters should give some proof of identification when the vote is stretched over several days or when they are not voting in their normal polling station. We have not asked for especially onerous proofs; they would be required only at elections that are different from the norm. The amendment would allow electoral registration officers great flexibility; they could accept many different proofs of identity before giving out the ballot paper.

I hope that when the Minister responds to this simple, common-sense measure, he will be able to tell the Committee that in those pilots that deviate from the norm, the rest of the electorate will be assured that there will be safeguards to ensure that personation will not increase.

Mr. Hurst: First, I should declare an interest, because the purport of the amendment—at least in part—is to enrich those of us commissioned to administer oaths. I so make that declaration. Notwithstanding that enticement, I oppose the amendment on the following grounds.

I am uncertain whether the Bill contains a definition of the words "polling station". I take it that, if one voted in a booth or a box in a supermarket, for the purpose of the election, that would be a polling station. With all due respect to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), there may be some defects in the drafting of the amendment, if the evil that he seeks to remedy is to be addressed.

The substance of the amendment deals with the production of documentation. In other debates on other amendments, the question of identity cards has been raised. I am a great supporter of identity cards—among a growing number of such supporters—but we do not have them at present. People with some experience of elections will know that it is not always possible for voters to find their polling cards, especially as local authorities now take it upon themselves to send out polling cards weeks ahead of an election. We might consider the effect on local government turnout if the only official notification of the election is a polling card sent out six weeks before.

At present, people can vote without any proof of identity at all. I suspect that no one in this place has not told a voter, "Don't worry, you don't need anything to vote. Just tell them who you are and where you live." All of a sudden, it will become much more difficult; one will have to produce a passport—many people do not have passports. One will have to produce a driving licence—

[Mr. Hurst]

that discriminates against those who do not drive. One will have to produce a printed statement from a bank or building society. By golly, that would be quite a task.

When collecting electors in a car, we will have to say, "You can't possibly come yet, Mrs. Jones, because you do not have all the documentation to satisfy them that you are who we know you are." If the amendment were accepted, we should place a great burden on the registration officer or the polling clerk at the polling station. Many arguments would ensue about whether a particular document was good enough evidence, or whether the written statement of the car driver who picked up electors from a certain address was a document sufficient to justify them being able to vote at that polling station.

Most pernicious of all, the documentary addition to voting is discriminatory against the poor, almost certainly discriminatory against the elderly and certainly discriminatory against those who live some distance from a polling station, in that if they leave the documents behind, they are unlikely to go back and get them.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman is making more of this than it is worth. We are asking for only one piece of documentation, and the amendment does provide for a lot of examples. There can be few people who would not be able to produce something with their name and address on it to show to the person giving out the ballot papers that they were who they said they were and lived where they said they lived.

Mr. Hurst: At present, that is not the position. I understood that the purpose of the Bill was to increase voting. If we are going to introduce documentary hurdles that people must jump over to poll, damage will ensue.

I understand the point that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley is trying to address. He wants to avoid people voting at their own polling station, and then traipsing down to Tesco, Sainsbury or wherever the hordes of democracy will hereafter reside and casting a second vote. However, with the wonders of the computer age and the amounts of money that public bodies spend on computerised systems, I would have thought it possible for computers in the polling stations or booths to be able to cross-check within the system who has already voted. If so, the need for documentary evidence is superfluous, and should be strongly resisted.

Mr. Forth: I am somewhat torn on the amendment, and I am puzzled by the implications of the options to vote at different places. If I, as a voter, am able to go to any one of a number of local places to vote—and I can choose from among them—presumably, if I have already voted at one, there must be a mechanism to communicate that fact to all the others to make sure that I do not do it again. In theory, I could go to each one, providing proof of identity, and vote several times over. I am sure that the Minister will reassure me that that has been considered.

I cannot agree with the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) that it is unreasonable to ask someone who is to cast their vote for their representative to be able to provide some demonstration of their identity. That is asked for in many other daily transactions, and the amendment would make it as easy as possible. However, I am not sure that the list would fulfil the function that is intended for it. The passport has a picture, but no address. The current driving licence has an address, but no picture. I am not sure what a printed statement from a bank would tell anyone about the person presenting it at a multiple polling station. Also, I share the hon. Gentleman's suspicions in respect of commissioners of oaths.

The amendment raises yet another question—a different example of the phenomenon that we examined in our discussions on the previous amendment. It is becoming ever more apparent that the possibility of loopholes and failures arising increases every time we consider variable times and places of election.

My hon. Friend has diligently moved the amendment and the Minister has equally diligently sought to answer questions and to reassure us about the circulars and so on. I hope that he will tell us, as he said he would, that my worries about multiple voting will be catered for, if not in the way that the amendment suggests. However, the mere fact that we have had to go through that process merely reinforces my suspicion that we are embarking on a dangerous route.

5.30 pm

In spite of the doubts that I have expressed about the amendment, something of its kind will be necessary to reassure us if we start to alter the electoral system. I agree with my hon. Friend about the words in the amendment that refer to

"such other document as may in the reasonable opinion of the registration officer constitute sufficient evidence".

That is the good old British solution of deciding what is "reasonable". Surely those words cover most of the objections raised by the hon. Member for Braintree. The reasonable and proper approach is to allow someone wanting and intending to vote to produce reasonable proof of his identity, whatever that proof might be. For Members of Parliament, it could be their parliamentary pass—I do not know, but it would be something like that.

I hope that the Minister will tell us that he and his officials have thought the issue through carefully and that he believes that there will and should be mechanisms in place properly to answer the doubts that my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) raised.

Mr. George Howarth: I congratulate the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) on raising the issue. It is the type of issue that the Committee should consider in its examination of the Bill. When local authorities plan their pilot schemes, it is important that they consider all the issues so that opportunities for personation do not arise.

I understand and sympathise with the concerns about electoral fraud. However, provided that the schemes are properly thought out, I fail to see why early voting or mobile polling stations should give rise to it. I shall explain the reasons for that view, because they are directly relevant to the comments of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth).

If there is more than one place at which an elector can vote, there must obviously be some link between them to ensure that, once someone has voted in one place, he cannot vote elsewhere. That is precisely the type of issue

that we expect to see dealt with in the applications that are made for pilot schemes. Indeed, fraud was covered in the circular to which I drew attention earlier. If there is no provision for such linkage, it simply would not be feasible to approve a pilot scheme.

The computer technology that is available to many local authorities, although by no means all of them, is sufficient, through modems and a central database on to which the register would be downloaded, to make it possible for someone's vote at a supermarket to be registered on the central database. Therefore, any other opportunity that that person would have to vote would be closed. That is the simple truth of the matter, and we will look for such assurances in the pilot schemes.

With that explanation, I hope that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley will feel able not to press the amendment.

Mr. Evans: This has been another useful debate, and I am grateful for the Minister's response.

The hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) mentioned the fact that we, as canvassers and candidates, often tell people not to worry that they do not have their polling cards because they can still vote without them. We stress that point and we do not want to remove that option. However, the amendment deals with a specific pilot project that could be extended. If people are able to vote in more than one polling station—at present, we are allowed to vote only in the one designated for our address—a new problem will be created. We want to deal with that problem by ensuring that more people are able to vote, but not that the same people vote more often at the same election.

From what the Minister said, the schemes that local authorities introduce may require proofs of identity. That may be why he does not want such a provision in the Bill.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend is a computer expert, but does he agree that if one has, for example, the opportunity to vote at three places in a district—at the primary school, at B&Q and at the supermarket—and all those places have to be linked by modem to a central database or to each other, that would require them to be online continuously for 15 hours, which would involve enormous cost?

Mr. Evans: I totally agree. Perhaps only one polling station would be made available to people other than the one in which they would normally vote. That depends on the pilot schemes.

Mr. George Howarth: To satisfy the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), I can say that the eighth point that needs to be considered in any application under the terms of the circular is an indication of the likely additional cost or savings arising from the running of a pilot scheme. That is one of the factors that the Home Secretary will take into account.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful to the Minister.

On proof of identity, in other countries something is done to voters when they vote, such as dyeing their finger or thumb, so that they are unable to vote again. We do not want to do that, and I am sure that the Home Secretary would look askance at any pilot projects that proposed to dye people's fingers after they had voted.

New technology, however, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) suggested, should at least provide the opportunity for local authorities to come up with pilot schemes, perhaps in alliance with new technology companies which will want to advance a particular technology and demonstrate to the rest of the country that it works. That technology would have to be proven.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): I am rather sorry that I missed the beginning of the debate because I am intrigued as to why the Conservative party, in tabling an amendment, did not look at the list of identification documents that it imposed on all electors in Northern Ireland at single polling stations.

Has the hon. Gentleman considered the problems that will arise for political parties that might want to have a presence at every polling point, as is the case with us in Northern Ireland for very good reasons? There are many problems with the idea of a multiplicity of polling points which need to be carefully thought through before we pursue that policy. That system would be wide open to abuse, especially organised abuse such as we experience in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great authority and experience of the problems that will arise when people are able to vote in more than one place and on more than one day. We shall therefore watch the Bill's progress carefully and note any amendments made in another place or in this place at later stages.

I hope that the Minister will listen carefully to the concerns of hon. Members generally that when we move away from single voting days and single polling stations, new problems will arise which need to be solved before elections take place. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 24, in page 12, line 2, at end insert—

"(2A) No scheme under this section that makes provision for voting on more than one day shall make provision for voting to take place on any Friday, Saturday or Sunday.".

The Second Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 25, in page 12, line 2, at end insert—

"(2A) No scheme under this section that makes provision for voting on more than one day shall make provision for voting to take place on more than three days before the day of the poll.".

Mr. Evans: We aim yet again to ensure that voting is made easier, but that due regard is paid to the sensitivities of large groups of people who would feel offended if voting were to take place on key religious days. Amendment No. 24 would rule out voting on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. I need not go into further detail on that.

It would be ironic if a measure aimed at increasing voting participation had the reverse effect. The working group considered the matter and, in paragraph 3.18, said:

"Pilot schemes would need to take account of the implications for strict religious observation of most faiths of any move from Thursday voting."

[Mr. Evans]

I know that the Minister is well aware of that problem.

Amendment No. 25 aims to restrict voting to four days, by stating that voting should occur for no more than three days before the day of the poll. Like colleagues who have already spoken, I am extremely sceptical about extending single-day voting. That is why I shall be listening carefully to the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) when he speaks to his amendment No. 86, on postal voting.

I think that we can address most of the problems that will result given the inability of people to get to polling stations because of mobility difficulties and because of the way in which jobs have changed. We know that, all of a sudden, people may be called away in the course of their employment. More readily available postal votes will meet most of these problems. However, if there is a pilot project for voting on more than one day, there must be certain safeguards. To have polling taking place for a few days in one week and a few days in another would be inoperable and unrealistic.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) has spoken about the problems of political parties being able to monitor what is taking place. Once we move to polling taking place on more than one day, and perhaps on more than one day in one week, we shall face real problems in allowing political parties to monitor the fair operation of elections. Amendment No. 25 would restrict the number of voting days before polling day.

Mr. Maclean: I do not support amendment No. 24. I believe that extending voting for local government elections beyond more than one day is nonsensical. However, if that is the way in which the Government wish to go, so that there can be voting for two or three days, and they want pilot schemes to that effect, I see no good reason to bar certain days of the week.

If we are to have genuine consultation, as the Minister has suggested, I assume that local authorities in certain areas will not come forward with proposals to have voting on the day of the Jewish sabbath or on a day of any other strict religious observance. Even if there is a second day of voting that falls on a holy day, there is no problem provided that there is one day on either side of it that is not a holy day.

I would be strongly opposed to a proposition that there should be only one day of voting, which could be moved to a Friday, Saturday or Sunday. Such a proposal would understandably cause great offence to those who still have some—

Mr. Hurst: I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman recalls that Saturday was commonly the polling day in urban district and rural district elections.

Mr. Maclean: I am perhaps slightly younger than the hon. Gentleman. I have no personal experience of what he says, but I believe that, historically, he is correct.

We have a fairly well-established precedent of Thursday being polling day. That is well known and well understood, but we still have a miserable turnout. That is not because it is difficult to vote. Those who do not vote in local government elections will turn out and vote in general elections, where the poll will be more than double that in other elections. It is not impossible for people to get to polling stations, and there are not awful difficulties that require two or three days for elections.

It seems that people have taken a different view about the merits of voting in local elections as opposed to general elections. Similarly, they have taken a view about the merits of voting in European elections. That is a route that I do not wish to go down. I merely suggest that, if the Government are minded to proceed with their proposition that there should be two or three days of polling for local government elections—I oppose that—local authorities must surely have the freedom to come up with any two or three days that they like, after proper consultation with local people. I would not rule out Friday, Saturday or Sunday.

I have participated in Sunday shopping debates in this place. We must admit, whether we like it or not, that millions more people go shopping on Sunday than to church. If it is the Government's intention to stick a voting box in every supermarket and every B&Q, it would make sense to have polling stations in the shops while they are open, and that would include a Sunday, with the limited shopping hours of between 10 and 4 o'clock. I am opposed to the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and I do not support his amendment, but that does not mean that I support the Government's view on increasing the amount of time during which polling may take place.

5.45 pm

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) pointed out to me that it is difficult to see what amendment No. 25 means. I do not want to steal his speech, but he said that the amendment was nonsensical. It refers to multiple voting days, and specifies that voting should not take place

"more than three days before the day of the poll."

If voting takes place on two or three days, which is the day of the poll? I assume that my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley means the last day of the poll—presumably the Thursday, or perhaps the Sunday.

Nevertheless, there is some sense in saying that, if the Government choose to go down the route of multiple voting days, there must be a cut-off. I think that one day is sufficient. I would grudgingly go to two days at most. Voting over three or four days would be nonsensical in local government elections or any other election. I support the thrust of amendment No. 25, but I would tighten it up.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Let me take the amendments in reverse order. On amendment No. 25, it seems sensible that a limit on the number of days should be built in to the legislation. Reference has been made to a drafting issue. There is also a practical issue for the political parties and those who administer elections. Spreading the elections over more than one day may bring in marginally more voters, but it entails greater expense and more work on the part of the officials, polling station staff, police and political parties. We must draw a line.

Amendment No. 24 refers to pilot schemes. It is right that bids for pilot schemes should come up from the grass roots. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) hopes to catch your eye, Mr. Lord,

on clause 11 and to speak about the position in her part of Scotland, reflecting the fact that there are different views in different parts of the country.

If voting takes place on a Friday, which may make it difficult for members of the Jewish community to vote, a range of dates must be provided to allow everyone with a strict religious view the opportunity to vote. It may be Sunday for some, Saturday for some and Friday for some. If there is to be non-Thursday voting, and voting is to take place over the long weekend, it must take place over the whole period, otherwise difficulties arise. We understand the issue, but I do not take the view that there should be an absolute bar in the legislation to voting on Sundays, Saturdays or Fridays.

Incidentally, I remember the participation of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) as a Minister in the debates on Sunday trading. We are now in the world of Sunday shopping. I am not persuaded that we are the better for it.

Mr. George Howarth: May I express sympathy for the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans)? I am glad that I have the right hon. Members for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) facing me, rather than behind me.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for moving the amendments, so that we can debate an issue that will be important to a large number of people. We must make sure that we do nothing to harm the interests of those with strong religious faith, especially anything that would prevent them from voting on a particular day of the week.

It is up to local authorities to decide which innovations they want to pilot. As we have already discussed, they are required to submit applications and, in so doing, they will have to consider the needs of all their electors. The guidance to local authorities on how to apply for a pilot scheme, to which I referred earlier, makes that clear. Among the material that a local authority will have to include in its application is an assurance

"that no voter will be put at a disadvantage by the proposed innovation".

That is unambiguous.

Clearly, any local authority that wants to try voting on a day other than Thursday will have to consider seriously the religious views of its population. Specific days will be more significant in some areas than in others. I assure the House that the Home Office is conscious of those issues. It is perhaps significant that, on Second Reading, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, in response to an intervention from the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie):

"If weekend voting ever became part of the national arrangements, we would have to ensure that it took place on both days. There are members of the Jewish community who would not wish to vote on a Saturday and there are members of other communities . . . who have strong feelings about the observance of the Sabbath. Sunday voting would not be acceptable to them."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 340, c. 172.]

For that reason, which the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border expressed clearly, we must provide options. I hope therefore that I have reassured the House—

Mr. William Ross: Party workers may also have severe difficulties in working on Saturdays or Sundays.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, which applies to workers of all parties.

Let us consider amendment No. 25. I am somewhat puzzled by the thinking behind it because it would impose unnecessary restrictions on local authorities that wished to run pilot schemes to allow voting to take place on more than one day. There is no valid reason for that. The working party on electoral procedures recommended that local authorities should be given the chance to try out innovative electoral procedures. Clause 10 provides for that. The aim of the provision is to allow local authorities the freedom to try out new procedures, which, we hope, may make it easier for people to vote. Imposing restrictions such as those that the amendment proposes would do the opposite. For example, why should voting not take place at the weekend immediately before the Thursday and in the intervening days? What is the objection to offering an early voting facility for more than three days? If a local authority believes that it can run such a scheme successfully, and that it will boost turnout, we should not prohibit such innovation.

I have already said that local authorities will need to give an assurance that no voter is put at a disadvantage. They will also need to provide an assurance that

"the opportunities for fraud will not be enhanced and the secrecy of the poll will be maintained."

Mr. Ross: The Government and everyone who has spoken seem to ignore the implications of multiple day voting for those who apply for postal votes. What difference will multiple day voting make to a time scale that is already tight?

Mr. Howarth: If the hon. Gentleman exercises a little patience, he will find that that subject will be debated later.

The debate has been useful. The amendment was not tabled as a probing amendment, but it has enabled us to consider serious issues, which could lead to disfranchisement for some people if the provisions are not implemented sensitively and properly. Nobody supports that. We now have a clearer picture of the way in which the scheme will work. I hope that it is sufficiently clear to persuade the hon. Member for Ribble Valley not to press the amendment.

Mr. Evans: The Minister has given assurances that those of strong religious beliefs will not be disadvantaged by changes in the pilot schemes or anything that follows them. I am reassured by that. Voting on multiple days will be expensive and none of us envisages polling stations being open throughout a local authority area for more than one day. However, it is possible that one polling station—perhaps at the town hall—will be open for early voting for a period of days.

As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, we are trying to provide some structure. For example, a polling booth might open for a couple of days, close for some strange reason and then re-open, but I am sure that the Home Secretary will take that into account in any submission on a pilot scheme made by any local authority. With those assurances, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr. Forth: Our short series of debates has illustrated beyond all doubt the incredible difficulties that would be

[Mr. Forth]

caused, were we to proceed with the clause. My difficulty with it is that it apparently stems from the proposition that people have huge problems casting their vote under our present electoral arrangements and that something should be done to ease those difficulties. I do not even accept that as an analysis or a proposition. There is no evidence that people experience enormous difficulties in voting. I doubt whether many Members of the House could come forward with evidence that their constituents have informed them, either verbally or in writing, that they have had great difficulty in voting and want them to make changes. I have received no such representations and doubt whether many other Members have.

We are therefore starting from the fanciful proposition that a large number of frustrated people in this country would dearly love to vote, but find it difficult to do so under the present arrangements. The clause is completely unnecessary, but it is worse than that. Our debates have teased out not only that, but the fact that the clause would give rise to considerable dangers and difficulties in the process of voting and holding elections, requiring increasingly elaborate and costly measures and safeguards that would, in themselves, endanger that very process.

We have to weigh up whatever advantages are being claimed for the clause that would induce people who do not vote to do so, as against the real dangers and difficulties that the measures would pose. As has already been suggested, it is rather odd that, with the same electoral arrangements, we get enormous variations in turnout in different elections—local, national, European Parliament or whatever they may be. It would appear that the difference in turnout has little or nothing to do with the arrangements that are in place, but everything to do with voter interest in the different levels of government or representation. That seems to be the variable, not the location of polling booths or the number of days available for voting.

The case has not been made to support proceeding with the clause, but I am somewhat reassured that at least a series of mechanisms are available or in place to make sure that we do not rush headlong into that. The onus is initially on the relevant local authorities. Should the clause be agreed to and should the Bill proceed—I hope that it will not—it will be interesting to see how many local authorities suggest well-thought-out schemes that will satisfy the Secretary of State in the way that the Minister helpfully described. That will show us whether we should proceed with such proposals.

Ministers have assured the Committee today that those schemes will have to be examined very closely to make sure that none of the weaknesses that have been exposed in our debates would affect our voting procedures. There is another worry, but we have received a reassurance and I am glad that we have: cost has to be a consideration in respect of the draft criteria, which already exist. I wonder whether at this stage anyone has made even a rough estimate of the difference in cost between the current system and providing new procedures, voting across two or three days, a number of different polling stations and polling opportunities—as we should call them in modern parlance—and all the security and computer systems that will be required.

6 pm

I suspect that, if we are to provide a viable, secure alternative to our existing procedures, the cost could prove prohibitive. I hope that that will be taken into consideration. This will not be a cost-free exercise. I hope that when consultation—or the equivalent that the Minister mentioned—takes place, people will be told about the possible cost increase that would be involved if they expressed enthusiasm for the different voting procedures offered to them.

This would not be a cost-free option; indeed, it might well be a very costly option. People should be asked whether they would like to be able to vote on different days, and in supermarkets—oh, and by the way, they would have to pay the following costs, through either their local taxes or national taxes. It should be made clear to them that this is not a cost-free option, but one to which a price tag is attached.

I am not a computer expert—I am quite the opposite—but I ask the techno-freaks among us how they think security can be guaranteed if we are to involve computers in the voting process. As I have said, I am a layman with no interest in computers, but every day I read in the newspapers about people breaking into computer systems and corrupting them. That is bad enough when our personal finances are involved; it would be disastrous if it posed any risk of tampering with material relating to voting.

It must be obvious by now that clause 10 not only has a very flimsy basis—indeed, no basis at all—but involves real dangers and risks for our electoral process. I wonder whether that has been taken into account sufficiently. The mere fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) had to table so many amendments, with the genuine aim of not only identifying the difficulties but dealing with them and providing appropriate safeguards, and the mere fact that the Minister has had to give repeated assurances about the measures that will have to be introduced locally and nationally, give some indication of the fragility of the process being proposed. That, surely, must be a great worry.

I am not inclined to support a clause that, in my view, leads us down a path that is not only unnecessary but dangerous. If we accepted it at this stage we would, at the very least, need much more reassurance later. We would need to be certain that what we were doing did not constitute an unnecessary folly and, above all, that we would not endanger the integrity of our voting system, which, as far as I know, has never been questioned so far.

Mr. Maclean: I was interested to note that, when the amendments to clause 10 were discussed—Conservative Members either supported them or distanced themselves from them, for various reasons—the Minister, with the kindness and courtesy for which he is famous, said that he was minded to accept an amendment, or accepted the spirit of it, and that we could look forward to either a revised Government amendment in due course, a Home Office circular or guidance to tidy up the problems identified by my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans).

That, I think, proves the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). If we try these radical new electoral procedures, there will be many dangerous loose ends to

tie up. I am not convinced that the Government have thought all that through, nor am I convinced that local authorities have the ability to do so.

I am not minded to support clause 10, because I consider it unnecessary to do so. If we look at voting patterns around the world, we see the position of countries that have just emerged from dictatorships and are experiencing democracy for the first time. In some African countries, voters may have to travel 100 miles to polling stations, but there is a 100 per cent. turnout—or very near that—because people are desperate to vote. They have not had that right before, and they treasure it.

We all say off pat that we must make it easier for people to vote at general and local elections in this country, but our history shows that the easier we make it, the more we take it for granted and the less we vote. If we shove a mobile polling station into every supermarket, outside the door of every school as the mums are picking up the kids, and at every other location where we think that it will be convenient for people to vote, we may find that fewer and fewer people do so.

I confess that I am one of those who has, on occasion, forgotten to vote at local government elections, or to organise my postal vote. I have made that mistake. I am not happy to admit it, but I must. I suspect that, for one reason or another, other hon. Members have neglected to vote at a local government election.

That is not because the system is too difficult, we do not qualify for a postal vote, or we are suddenly called away on urgent business. These days, we can easily get a postal vote for almost any reason under the sun. If we legitimately think that, at some time in the future, we might not be in the area to vote, whatever the reason, we can get a postal vote. It is very easy, yet some of us fail or forget to do so. Seventy per cent. of the electorate at every local government election do not do so, yet voting has never been easier.

The Government's solution is to increase the number of days. They propose two, three or more days. I was worried by the Minister's reply on amendment No. 25. If I heard him correctly, he did not want any bar on the number of days that polling stations could be open for voting, or a voting system could be available for people to use; it could be three, four, five or even more days. Therefore, I am not convinced on principle that we need clause 10. The Government are making it easier for people to vote in the vain hope that it will encourage more people to do so.

One of the benefits of our present system is that, for 20 or 30 years, voting has regularly been on a Thursday. Every hon. Member has experience of going around at general elections. Probably half the people to whom we speak know that the election is on a Thursday some time soon. Other electors will not be sure what day it is on, but probably about half know without prompting from us that the general election and elections generally take place on a Thursday. I expect that that results in a reasonable number of people getting to the polling station on the right day.

If we remove that certainty, so that, in local authority areas throughout the country, voting can be on any day of the week, a greater number of the electorate than ever before will be confused about which day the poll will take place. If my experience is anything to go by, everyone to whom I speak denies that they have ever had a polling card through the letter box. We all know that they deny even that they have had the party leaflet—the one we delivered five minutes earlier. They say, "No, I have never seen it."

That is not treating the electorate with contempt. We are the same. We deny having received letters, cards or circulars—*[Interruption.]* We do not deny it deliberately, but one cannot remember, with that mass of mail, some of the individual correspondence that one gets. Our electorate are the same. They get so much bumf through the letter box that they do not identify certain correspondence. If they receive polling cards two or three weeks before an election saying that they can vote on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, or Saturday, Sunday and Tuesday, and that they can do it in various places, we will have a shambles. We will have confusion. I do not think that it will increase the number of people who vote.

The Minister said that the Government do not want to include in the Bill a provision that the Home Secretary shall not approve schemes unless he is satisfied that the schemes have adequate local support, and I assume that the extent of the consultation conducted on the schemes will be one of the yardsticks that the Home Secretary uses in judging local support. I should be alarmed, therefore, if the Government are planning to put pilot schemes into operation in May 2000.

I do not see how—even if the Bill were to proceed apace through both this place and the other place—there could be adequate notification and proper local consultation on such schemes, or how such schemes could legitimately be put into operation, before May 2000. Before we could have proper consultation in a local authority area, we would come up against a very tight deadline.

I appeal to Ministers: if they are going down that route, for goodness sake, publicise it in detail; and do not urge local authorities to submit rushed schemes, which hard-pressed Home Office Ministers will have to study not at leisure, but in a great rush, so that mistakes are made. As the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) suggested, such an attempt would also increase the danger of gerrymandering.

Mr. Haselhurst, if I wanted to be political—

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The right hon. Gentleman seems to be quite adrift as to the form of address that should be used when we are in Committee of the whole House and for this particular occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Maclean: Sir Alan, my apologies to you.

The hon. Member for Braintree made the key point on the dangers of gerrymandering. If I were to be political, and if I were a politically minded local authority, I could invent a scheme—which I am certain would pass Home Office scrutiny—in which, for example, I have the choice of positioning polling stations outside either Safeway supermarket in Penrith, or the Co-operative supermarket, depending on which one might suit my political purposes and provide me with the most votes.

We are also blessed in our town with two large schools—a grammar school and an excellent comprehensive school—that are 200 yds apart. I could devise a scheme, which could be open to challenge,

[Mr. Maclean]

in which a mobile polling station would be positioned outside one school rather than another, so that I may favour people of one political persuasion over another.

The hon. Member for Braintree dealt with the effects of positioning a polling station outside one factory rather than a different factory or an office complex, where voters' political views might be slightly different.

The scheme is open to abuse, and I am not certain that the Home Office, with the best will in the world, will be able to spot some of the potential abuses that local authorities could build into it. We shall have to give very careful consideration before approving any such scheme. Although I realise that there is a Home Office circular on the matter, I should have much preferred for a schedule to be included in the Bill, building in cast-iron safeguards. Subsequently, we could invite local authorities to submit proposals that satisfy all the criteria in those safeguards, and then approve those proposals.

I do not intend to force a vote on clause 10 stand part, because I would have the support of many hon. Members, but I do not think that the clause should stand part, and I may wish to return to it.

6.15 pm

Mr. William Ross: Following on briefly from what the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) has just said, in the course of an election there is severe pressure on time. That makes it difficult for legitimate political parties that are trying to get their electorate out, but it also makes it difficult for those who are trying to manipulate the system, because the compressed time scale gives them no slack. The Minister has experience in Northern Ireland and knows what I am driving at and whom I am pointing the finger at.

The concept of allowing voting over a period of days is fraught with very great dangers. Those dangers do not currently exist on this side of the Irish sea, but we have no way of knowing what the future may bring. I ask the Minister in all sincerity never to allow multiple days for voting in Northern Ireland under any circumstances and to think very carefully before going down that road in Great Britain.

The concept of voting in a supermarket is daft. When a young mother is coming out of the supermarket in the evening with her shopping and two or three children in tow, worrying about getting the tea made, the last thing that she wants is to be confronted with a polling station. I see that the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie), who is the only hon. Lady present, is nodding. I know what my wife would have said if that had happened to her at that period in her life. We can have a fair idea of what most young mothers would say.

I was in New Zealand once when an election was being held. There were polling stations in garages along the street because the law there says that nobody in an urban area should have to walk more than a quarter of a mile to a polling station. I am not certain that it has improved the turnout. The turnout at an election has very little to do with the number of days, the period of time—although a long period on one day is probably all to the good—or the distance that people have to travel to the polling station. That may have a minor effect, but the main factor that drives people to vote is whether they want rid of the lot that they have in office. If it is really important to them, whether the election is local, national or at some intermediate level, people will vote.

My advice to the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the Government is a lesson that my party has taken on board: if a party makes it worth people's while to vote for it, it has nought to fear.

Mr. George Howarth: I shall be brief. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) has some general concerns and some that are specific to Northern Ireland. I am not as well briefed as he is on some of the difficulties there, but I am well aware that there are difficulties. I offered yesterday to meet him and I asked my office this morning to arrange discussions with him. I am anxious to address his concerns. I assure him that it is most unlikely—I think that it is not even possible—that any of the pilots would be set up in Northern Ireland because of the difficulties that he described.

Throughout my chairmanship of the working party that produced the proposals I tried to create a consensus. There was a consensus among the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and my party. All the other parties were copied in to the papers and information that the working party received. There was no lack of effort on our part to create a consensus. I am pleased that, although there have been various debates on the details of the clause, there is a consensus between the main parties that there should be pilots and that those pilots should be properly evaluated and considered with due regard paid to the potential for fraud and gerrymandering—that word has been bandied about. There is a consensus that the clause is worth a try.

The modern expression for building consensus is "big tent politics". I am pleased that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) is at least under the awning and that the Liberal Democrats have taken a tentative step into the tent. I regret that the right hon. Members for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) are in a bivouac in another field.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 11

REVISION OF PROCEDURES IN THE LIGHT OF PILOT SCHEMES

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move amendment No. 66, in page 14, line 3, leave out

"(including the New Northern Ireland Assembly)".

This is a drafting amendment, essentially to remove the word "new" from the description of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Amendment agreed to.

Question proposed, That the clause, as amended, stand part of the Bill.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): I shall try to be brief. I did not attempt to catch the eye of Mr. Lord on amendment No. 24 as I understood it to refer only to England and Wales. Clause 11 allows me to say something about voting in Scotland as it deals with rolling out innovations that have been successfully piloted.

Perhaps the Minister will let me know whether there will be pilot schemes in Scotland as well as in England and Wales.

Let me state again my reservations about weekend voting, particularly on Sundays. As the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who has now left the Chamber, said, I raised the matter on Second Reading. The Home Secretary acknowledged that if weekend voting ever became part of the national arrangements, we would have to ensure that it took place on both days. That would be absolutely essential, although I am not sure about voting taking place over several days.

I am particularly concerned about Sunday voting, which would not be welcomed by many in my constituency.

Mr. O'Brien: I think that I can deal with the hon. Lady's concerns very briefly by telling her that local election procedures are a devolved matter and are therefore a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Mrs. Michie: Indeed, but under clause 11, if pilot schemes are accepted, the House can roll out the mechanism across the entire United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Mr. O'Brien: For general elections.

Mrs. Michie: Yes. The clause refers to elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

So, particularly in respect of general elections, Sunday voting would not be welcomed in my constituency and other parts of the highlands and islands of Scotland which still have many Gaelic speaking populations and a tradition of Sunday observance. We try to keep Sunday not just as a day of religious observance, but as a day for the family; a day that is different, a day for a rest and a little bit of peace and quiet in what has become a life of frenetic activity and, for many poor souls, of great stress.

The fourth report of the Home Affairs Committee refers to this and states at paragraph 63:

"There are potential problems arising from the fact that both Saturdays and (more significantly numerically) Sundays are days of religious observance for many people. The Home Office paper noted objections on this count from both churches and individuals and the Scottish and Northern Ireland Offices referred to similar problems."

It also acknowledges that polls would have to be open on both Saturday and Sunday to accommodate the objections, and that would make the exercise more expensive. It is argued that the objections could be met by using a postal vote. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) is not in his place, but I agree with him that people often do not apply for a postal vote in time.

A significant number of people would not vote on a Sunday. The report also suggests that people might be away at weekends. People are used to going to vote before they go to work or after they get home during the week. When the previous Government were in power, a concerted effort appeared to be made to undermine Sundays. I recall opposition to Sunday trading, and I endorse the comments my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) made earlier on that subject. I also recall a debate in this Chamber that forced Scotland to allow off-licence sales and to open betting shops on a Sunday. That was rammed through in the face of the opposition of a majority of Scottish Members of Parliament, which was regrettable.

I ask the Government to safeguard the preferences of voters and not to put more pressure on Sundays, for the sake of families, those who would have to officiate at the polling stations, and everyone else who craves a day of rest in an increasingly hectic way of life.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I endorse the pleas of my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) and I wish to add two points. Community views need to be respected, and the Bill will permit that.

The first point is that it is clear to me from inquiring of people that the promise that we were given that people would not be expected to work on Sundays is being ignored. In many places, the reality is that people have no choice. If they want their jobs, they must work on Sundays. People's rights are not being respected.

The second point relates to differences between constituencies. My constituency is very different from that of my hon. Friend—there are probably not two more different constituencies in the whole of the United Kingdom. I have many constituents who live in London during the week, but who are not here at weekends. Increasing numbers of people have weekday homes and holiday or weekend homes. We must address that issue, because if we introduce weekend voting—and I do not oppose that if people want it in certain parts of the country—we must recognise that the electorate will be different.

If we introduced Sunday voting, we would have to enter an entire debate about second homes. Significant additional people would be able to vote in places in which they were not customary, working, resident members of the community. The consultation must take that into account; otherwise we would have a worse situation than the Vale of Glamorgan's, with not just 32 extra voters registered from overseas but hundreds or thousands of extra voters who had only a partial link with a constituency. That is an additional reason to take account of local and broader national considerations before we invade traditional patterns of life and community living.

6.30 pm

Mr. William Ross: It is not often that I agree with Liberal Democrat Members, but I do on this matter, as I did whenever Sunday trading was discussed.

Clause 11(1) gives the Secretary of State very great powers. I hope that no Secretary of State would exercise them without full consultation with, and the agreement of, all the major political parties. Our electoral system must be free from taint. The possibility offered by the provision is that a Secretary of State could introduce schemes that were politically favourable to his party in any one of a number of places in the United Kingdom, but not in all. That would whip the rug from under the concept of democratic accountability and democratic elections. I hope that the Minister will give an unbreakable commitment that real consultation will be held and real agreement secured before any such schemes are introduced, even where they appear to be reasonable.

Subsection (3) states that an order made under subsection (1) could apply to local elections in Northern Ireland. That seems to fly in the face of the assurance that

[Mr. William Ross]

I was given a few moments ago in relation to clause 10. What are the Government's intentions with regard to that provision? In Northern Ireland, pressure can be exerted in elections other than general elections. I recall that the nationalist community on one estate were not too anxious to vote in an election. After a gentleman who had served a long sentence for multiple murder visited houses there in the last hour or two of the poll, it was amazing how many people came out to vote. I hope that Ministers will consider that point carefully and remember the undertaking that has already been given.

Subsection (6) states that any order that in other circumstances could be treated as a hybrid instrument will not be so treated under the Bill. That is a serious step. I hope that the Minister will explain why the power is needed in the Bill.

Mr. Evans: We, too, are unhappy about the sweeping powers given to the Secretary of State in clause 11(1). Unless we are satisfied with the assurances given to the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), we will revisit clause 11 at a later stage.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government have no plans to oblige people to vote on a Sunday. The Bill provides for ample debate about the benefits or otherwise of any pilot scheme. The Government have said repeatedly that it is our intention to consult fully on such matters. I know that the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) has been told by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that he would be happy to discuss any proposals with him. Once we see how the pilot schemes work we can consult on their outcomes and find whether we can achieve a broad consensus on which to move forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 11, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 4

ABSENT VOTING IN GREAT BRITAIN

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I beg to move amendment No. 86, in page 39, line 18, at end insert—

"Closing date for applications

7A. In paragraph (2) of regulation 69 of the Representation of the People Regulations 1986 (as amended by the Representation of the People (Amendment) Regulations 1997), for the words '5 p.m. on the eleventh day' there shall be substituted the words 'noon on the fifth day (in the case of an application received by post), or noon on the second day (in the case of an application made in person),'.".

The amendment would move back the deadlines for postal voting applications to the fifth day before polling or, for applications in person, to the second day. I hope that we are in the big tent of consensus both across the Committee and between Front and Back Benchers. The amendment, I hope, has the key to solving many of the issues that have been raised by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie).

The current applications deadline is the 11th working day before the election—in other words, the Wednesday just over a fortnight before polling day. I am told that the election administrators are adamant that they cannot deal with postal vote applications in less time. If that is so, nothing illustrates better their over-cautious approach. The Home Affairs Committee thought that it was a ludicrously early deadline, especially now that registration offices are all computerised. It will be even more ludicrous when we have postal voting on demand.

The Home Affairs Committee did not specify a deadline, but I think that the proposal in amendment No. 86 is in the spirit of its recommendation: having postal vote applications by post by the Thursday before polling day and in person by the Tuesday before polling day. Those are conservative targets. In its evidence to the Select Committee, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives said that it was possible for proxy vote applications to be granted on polling day. Back in 1993, the Plant report recommended that postal votes should be granted up to polling day, or the eve of polling day.

In Sweden, one can apply for and get a postal vote in any post office on the eve of poll and, in many cities, up to 5 pm on polling day. Indeed, in one post office in Stockholm, one can get it up till 7 pm, one hour before the polls close. That might be one reason why turnout in Sweden is more than 80 per cent., compared with 71 per cent. here. It is not because Swedish politics are that much more interesting.

It is difficult to believe that the 11th day provision was itself a concession. The previous deadline was the 13th day, which meant that people often had only four days after an election was called in which to apply for a postal vote. However, the changes in the Bill mean that electoral registration officers no longer have to consider why someone is applying for a postal vote, or satisfy themselves that the reason is genuine. They can grant the postal vote immediately; it can be sent by return of post, or handed over the counter. I do not understand why the election administrators say that it is difficult to do that in less than 11 days when in Sweden it is apparently possible to do it in one hour. In any case, the argument that it takes 11 days is rather undermined by the fact that late applications can still be dealt with up to the sixth day before an election, and applications from polling station staff up to the fourth day before.

I suggest that the Minister sets a deadline for the administrators that is closer than 11 days. I think that a five-day period is perfectly achievable. I understand that the Home Office believes in setting deadlines to get work done, and this is a classic case. Home Office Ministers need to set deadlines that the administrators can work around. Making it easier to apply for and get postal votes will solve many of the problems to do with early voting and Sunday voting. If it is easy enough to get a postal vote, people will not worry about elections being held on a Saturday or a Sunday. If it is that easy to get a postal vote, we will not need an elaborate system of early voting—we will effectively be able to go to a post office, library or town hall, and get our postal vote up to within days of the election.

There is support for the amendment from all parties; I urge the Minister to find out whether the Home Office will relent on this matter.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I fully support the proposal made by the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton). I am

reminded of the phrase from the Bible that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Elections are made for people to participate in, not the other way around. Although it is easy to find technical objections, it must be possible with all the modern technology to have the smallest period—literally a few hours—for people to register.

We all know that people pretend reasons to obtain postal or absent votes, for their own convenience, because they will not be around or because they are not certain whether they will be at home. We have to allow that flexibility. I hope that the Minister will be as supportive as possible. This may be one occasion when we have to say to the electoral administrators, "It may be difficult, but you have to deliver; we are a modern democracy".

Mr. William Ross: The existing time scale has been written in to prevent fraud by ensuring that applications are genuine. My electoral officers tell me that it is already extremely tight. It is difficult to understand how the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) could, a few minutes ago, have calmly accepted clause 12, which provides that the existing arrangements shall persist in Northern Ireland—something with which I am in full agreement. His intention may be good—although it is all motherhood and apple pie in my view—but it is inconceivable that the measure would work in practice. I hope that the Committee will reject the amendment.

Mr. George Howarth: My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) makes a strong argument. The principle and sentiment behind his amendment are good. The difficulty for my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department and I is that all our present advice suggests that the practical problems of implementation foreseen by the electoral administrators would make it hard—if not impossible—to comply with such a deadline.

However, my hon. Friend has undertaken to speak to the electoral administrators—if possible, he will do so next week—to impress upon them the feelings of the Committee, to see whether we can find a way of dealing with the practicalities. I caution the Committee to take seriously the strictures of the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross). When we make such changes, we must be absolutely certain that we do not open the door to fraud. With those remarks, and our positive attitude, I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea will feel able to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Linton: With that assurance from my hon. Friend, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 4 agreed to.

Clause 13

ASSISTANCE WITH VOTING FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES.

Mr. Barnes: I beg to move amendment No. 28, in clause 13, page 14, line 34, at end insert—

"(1A) After Rule 25 there shall be inserted—

"25A—(1) In the exercise of his functions under Rule 25 above, the returning officer shall have particular regard to the accessibility of polling stations to disabled persons.

(2) The returning officer shall carry out an annual accessibility audit of each polling station, which shall in particular have regard to the matters set out in paragraph (3) below, and shall consult thereon such organisations as appear to him to be representative of disabled persons in his area.

(3) The following points shall (without prejudice to the generality of the assessment) be taken into account in deciding whether a polling station is suitable for use by disabled persons—

(a) the condition of any pathway;

(b) the distance to be covered between the curtilage of the premises in which the polling station is situated and the polling station itself;

(c) the distance from the polling station of car parking for disabled persons;

(d) the height of any kerb, and the option of any temporary ramp;

(e) the height and number of steps, and the option of any permanent or temporary ramp;

(f) the signposting of alternative accessible entrances at the main entrance and all possible approaches;

(g) the space inside the polling station to allow manoeuvring space for wheelchairs;

(h) the levels of lighting;

(i) the floor surface, and if highly polished or slippery, the availability of flat and even floor coverings;

(j) whether doormats and mat-wells are level to the floor;

(k) the width of doorways, height of door-handles, heaviness of door, and its direction of opening;

(l) the availability of hand-rails next to steps;

(m) the right to take a guide-dog into a polling station;

(n) the provision of large and clear print signs; and

(o) the use of colour contrast and markings on step edges.

25B—(1) Following the audit pursuant to Rule 25A(2) above, the returning officer shall designate such polling stations as appear to him suitable for use by disabled persons and shall publish, in at least two newspapers circulating widely in the constituency, a local radio station and otherwise as he considers fit, a list of his designations.

(2) A polling station shall not be so designated unless the returning officer intends to provide at least one wheelchair-accessible polling booth, with a ballot box being placed at a height that a person in a wheelchair can reach unaided; and it shall be the duty of the returning officer to make such provision at each designated polling station.

(3) The returning officer shall take such steps as are necessary to ensure that—

(a) at least half of the polling stations for which he is responsible shall be so designated within two years of the passing of the Representation of the People Act 2000; and

(b) all polling stations shall be so designated within five years of the passing of the Representation of the People Act 2000.

(4) Details of the designated status (or otherwise) of a polling station shall be provided by the returning officer on all official poll cards.".".

The Chairman of Ways and Means: With this, it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 117, page 14, line 45, at end insert—

"and

(c) temporary ramps, matting for uneven or slippery surfaces and any other such equipment which may be deemed necessary to allow wheelchair access to polling stations.".

[Mr. Barnes]

No. 118, page 14, line 45, at end insert—

"(2) If the Presiding Officer is not satisfied that a polling station is fully accessible to disabled voters, arrangements shall be made to allow such voters to attend at an alternative polling station.".

6.45 pm

Mr. Barnes: Amendment No. 28 is the longest amendment, but this will not be the longest speech. It has been said on occasion that, in my amendments, I have stood alone, like Daniel in the lion's den. On this occasion, I have cross-party support from the hon. Members for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) and for St. Ives (Mr. George)

Under the Bill, equipment is to be provided at polling stations to enable blind and partially sighted people to vote unaided. Those with disabilities, including an inability to read, will be able to vote with the assistance of a companion. While such proposals are welcome, there is nothing further in the Bill to enable disabled people to gain access to polling stations. This could come with promised future legislation to set up an electoral commission, or whenever we get full civil rights for disabled people.

Full access to polling stations could be added to this Bill as provided for in my unsuccessful Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill in 1994, from which these amendments are taken. The road that I am going down is explained in written evidence that I gave to the Select Committee on Home Affairs. I pointed out that Scope—the former Spastics Society—produced two reports about access to polling stations at the 1992 and 1997 elections. The latter survey—of 1,272 polling stations in 303 constituencies in Britain—discovered that 94 per cent. of polling stations had one or more access problems; 82 per cent. had no ramp; and 46 per cent. had no ballot box placed at accessible levels.

Some 6.5 million people in the UK suffer from some form of disability, and access to polling stations is a serious problem. Disabled people should have the same right to exercise their vote as that enjoyed by able-bodied people, and they should not have to resort to the use of proxy or postal votes unless it is their choice.

The key features of the amendments were contained in my Bill in 1994. First, there should be an annual accessibility audit to be carried out at polling stations by electoral registration officers, with the help of disability organisations in the area. Secondly, stations should be designated as accessible as they meet set standards. Thirdly, disabled people should have the right to vote at designated stations. Fourthly, all stations should be designated within five years.

The amendment lists the matters to be taken into account in accessibility audits, and was drawn up from information supplied at the time of the 1994 Bill by a wide range of organisations representing disabled people. The amendment lists 15 points that came out of the consultations, and all the matters discussed previously have been incorporated into my amendments.

Given the massive support that I received from the Labour party for my Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill in 1993, which pressed for rolling registers and access to polling stations for disabled people—including the strong support of the present Prime Minister—and the massive Labour support that I received for the 1994 Bill, I assume that the case that I have just put is favoured by the Home Office.

The only questions that can remain open are of detail: whether particular difficulties need to be overcome in some areas and the method of implementation. Those problems could be ironed out and we should accept the amendment.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I support the amendment. What is the difference between a London taxi cab and a polling station? Every single London taxi cab is accessible to disabled people; four fifths of polling stations are not.

The time scale according to which two thirds of polling stations would be accessible in two years and all would be accessible in five years is reasonable. It is important that people are registered to vote, and we shall discuss that if we reach new clause 2. It is also important that people should be able to vote. As the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who has a great reputation on this matter, has persistently said, disabled people should be able to vote as easily as able-bodied people. I support the amendment.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I apologise to the Committee for the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) had to leave. He was in the Chamber until a short while ago, but he had to catch his train to Cornwall. He would have spoken, but he wants me to make a few points on his behalf.

It is important that such provisions are in the Bill. In spite of the much good work done by those involved in electoral administration and a lot of progress, we all know from reports such as the Scope and the Polls Apart reports that disabled people often come across poor provision in electoral services and at electoral venues.

In the interests of equality, it is not acceptable to tell people with a disability that they can have a postal or a proxy vote. Such votes have been open to abuse, and my hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives had experience of that in the 1992 election. It was found that people took proxy votes from people who lived in a home and filled them in on their behalf. It was an unacceptable and appalling case.

People with disabilities want to be like the rest of us. They want to be able to change their minds as the election draws nearer. The fact that they are forced to take a view a week or 10 days before the election does not give them the same civil liberty that the rest of us enjoy.

Many polling stations are in public buildings. Therefore, they should be accessible, and schools should be accessible for everyday use. Schools are often used for polling, but the distance between the entrance to the school premises and the ballot box is often hugely greater than the distance from the edge of the kerb to the entrance to the school. People are sent on a wild goose chase around an obstacle course of playgrounds and corridors before they can vote. Many practical measures should be considered.

As the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) suggested, the present provision is not adequate and many people resent it hugely. It is like saying to someone with a disability that he can have a pizza with us; the only difference

is that we can go to the restaurant and that person has to have a dial-a-pizza at home. That is often the practical, crude difference.

The Minister and the Government realise that we hold strong views on this. I hope that this all-party amendment will find favour with the Committee and the Government so that many things that should have been taken for granted a long time ago appear in the Bill.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said that his hon. Friend the Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) had gone to catch a train. Many hon. Members will sympathise with his predicament.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) has tabled amendments that have received broad support. The Government very much sympathise with the principle behind them, but cannot accept them in their current form. We do not accept that there should be a mandatory obligation.

The working party on electoral procedures recommended national standards on access to polling stations and drew on direct inputs from disability organisations such as Scope and the Royal National Institute for the Blind. However, their guidance was pre-empted by the Government issuing to every returning officer, in connection with the European parliamentary elections, national access standards. Those standards provide checklists for returning officers to use to assess the accessibility of polling stations and to help disabled people to enter them. A number of the standards are similar to the provisions proposed in the amendments. The working party considered whether such standards should always be mandatory for every polling station and they decided that that would not be practical.

As the working party recognised, district and borough councils are already under a statutory duty to designate as polling places locations that are accessible to the disabled, where that is practical. Returning officers' choice of locations for polling stations is often extremely limited as a direct consequence of those requirements, and it is simply not possible always to identify an accessible site. It is not reasonable to require returning officers to carry out the type of extensive adaptations proposed in the amendment to polling locations that may not be publicly owned.

The working party recommended that the Home Office should issue new and consolidated guidance to electoral administrators on all aspects of access to electoral services to support the kinds of standard that are described in the amendment.

We can achieve much of what my hon. Friend wants by way of those national standards, which will give strong guidance to electoral returning officers. They already have a statutory obligation to provide accessible centres where that is practical, and there are grants available from the Home Office to assist with provision of that access.

I offer my hon. Friend the further encouragement that clause 10 provides the opportunity for local authorities to pilot a number of schemes that may well increase accessibility, and I know that some local authorities are considering ways to increase disabled access. I hope that with that encouragement and the commitment to having consolidated guidelines, which will improve access much more quickly than the legislation could, my hon. Friend will feel able to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Barnes: I am very disappointed by the Minister's response. Of course much will depend on the contents of the guidance that the Home Office will issue to electoral returning officers. It may well be that the guidance is very much in line with my proposals. However, if that is so, what is wrong with including such matters in the Bill? These are not points of detail that need to be put off until another day.

The Minister is not saying that the proposals will be included in future legislation developed by the Electoral Commission or a disability rights Bill. As those measures are introduced, as I hope they will be, we will have further opportunities to raise these matters.

I shall be keen to take up the Minister's point about the role that local authorities can play. I shall encourage local authorities in my area, which have a good record on disability matters and have tried to do a great deal about access for disabled people, to take on their role.

I shall live to fight another day on these matters, and on that basis I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. William Ross: I beg to move amendment No. 106, in page 14, line 40, leave out "station" and insert "booth".

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 107, in page 14, line 45, at end insert

"and—

(c) versions of the ballot paper in Braille, which shall be available from the presiding officer".

Mr. Ross: The amendments' intent is perfectly plain to everyone. The Bill says that a

"large version of the ballot paper . . . shall be displayed inside the polling station",

but the polling station is the whole building, and that seems to me the wrong way to inform the partially sighted of the content of the ballot paper. If the display of that document is to be of any use to them, it should be in the polling booth, where individuals are trying to cast their ballot. Returning officers could of course display it in the polling station as well, if they wished, and the Government may want to require the document to be displayed in the station and the booth.

That measure is of use only to those who have are partially sighted. I have a nephew who is completely blind, so I am aware of the difficulties that such people face in those circumstances. In every constituency, several people—many more than we might think—have such a condition. It is therefore my view that, whenever we are trying to help those who are partially sighted, that help will not be sufficient—

It being Seven o'clock, THE CHAIRMAN *left the Chair to report progress and ask leave to sit again.*

Committee report progress.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Representation of the People Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Question agreed to.

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

Mr. Ross: As I was saying, that which is sufficient for the partially sighted is nowhere near sufficient for those who are totally blind. That being so, we must consider other options.

We cannot print large ballot papers, even for the partially sighted. The ballot paper must be the same size for everyone because, if they were not, it might be possible to destroy the secrecy of the ballot once larger papers are tipped out. We do not want that. The partially sighted might need a magnifying device within the polling booth. That is something that the Minister will have to consider. However, those who are totally blind are not helped by such devices. They need the information in Braille.

As the Minister will know, Braille is produced on thickish card. I would suspect that it is more easily damaged than some folk might wish. It seems to be the only way in which the totally blind can be helped. Therefore, a version of the ballot paper in braille should be available from the presiding officer or from others in the polling booth. That should act as an overlay with a gap in which the person could mark his X, or whatever. I tabled the amendment in an effort to try to concentrate the Government's mind, or the Minister's mind, on what is needed. The totally blind should be allowed an overlay or something similar, or we allow the companion, who is referred to in other amendments, to enter the polling booth with them.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The working party on electoral procedures was very concerned to improve access to the electoral process for blind and partially sighted voters. It made a number of recommendations in this area to which the Bill gives effect. One of them was that a large-print version of the ballot paper should be displayed in the polling station. That will enable partially sighted voters to ascertain who the candidates are, and to decide whom they favour.

Amendment No. 106 would require such a large-print version of the ballot paper to be displayed in every voting compartment. Is that really necessary? So long as a large-print version is displayed prominently in the polling station, partially sighted voters will be able to study the list of candidates to decide whom they like before retiring to the privacy of the voting booth to cast their vote. I shall describe in a moment how they might do that.

In the recent European parliamentary elections, the ballot paper in the London region was 77.5 cm long. That is 31 in for those hon. Members who have not yet converted to metric. That was the normal size. I cannot begin to imagine how large a large-print version would be, but I imagine that it would be too long to fit neatly into a standard voting booth. For those reasons, I do not think that it would be wise to pass amendment No. 106.

Once having made up their mind how they want to vote, blind and partially sighted voters will be able to vote, thanks to another working party recommendation, by using a voting template. That might take the form of a piece of cardboard into which the ballot paper can be slotted. An ordinary ballot paper could be slotted into the piece of card. It would have holes cut out over the boxes in which crosses are placed so the voter, having decided by using the large sign which candidate he wants to vote for—that is, if he is partially sighted—can use his fingers to count down on the ballot paper to vote for whichever candidate he or she wishes.

We are also considering what form the voting template should take, and would welcome suggestions. One issue that we must consider is whether it would be sensible and cost-effective—it may well be—to use the voting template for Braille, so that some element of the Braille list could appear on the template. The ordinary ballot paper could still be used, so that people could put their ballot paper into the box in the ordinary way, and no one would know, when the votes were counted, whether it was that of a blind person or a person who was partially sighted.

The working party has already started to address some of the issues. Having shown that the Bill contains some useful suggestions for ways in which we would assist the blind and partially sighted, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will feel able to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Ross: Although I am satisfied with the answer to amendment No. 106, I am not satisfied with the answer given to amendment No. 107. If there were 36 names on the ballot paper, what size would the large-print version be in the polling station? It would cover a wall of the school. In Northern Ireland, we are familiar with quite long lists under the proportional representation system.

I hope that the Minister will reconsider the suggestion. It depends on the amount of sight that the individual has, which can range from pretty well non-existent to reasonably good. However, having heard what the Minister said, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Ross: I beg to move amendment No. 108, in page 15, leave out lines 19 to 21.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 109, in page 15, line 30, leave out from "election" to end of line 32.

Mr. Ross: These amendments are in the same general spirit as the previous two. As the Bill is drafted, it seems that a companion can assist only two people, both of whom are close relations, or that the companion must be eligible to vote in that election. Those are two entirely different classes of people who can go into a polling booth with a disabled person to help him or her vote. We must think more carefully about the provision.

The relatives are specified in the words that I seek to remove through amendment No. 109. They are the

"father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife, son or daughter of the voter"

and have

"attained the age of 18 years."

Those individuals do not need to be able to vote in the election—in other words, they may live in a different ward or constituency.

However, any person

"who is entitled to vote as an elector"

—not a relation at all—can go along and act as a companion, to help the disabled person to vote. Why, then, is it necessary to list all the close relations? There must be sensible explanation, or have officials simply got into a twist when they tried to define who could act as a companion?

The relations need not be able to vote in the elections. They may live 100 miles away and come to help the disabled voter. Some people have few relations or none living locally, and there might be three disabled people living in one house, who might all need help and who might have only one relative living close by.

A Conservative elector living in a mining village may not be willing to ask another resident of that village for help. I can think of similar situations, for different reasons, in Northern Ireland. The difficulties are not fully addressed in the Government's proposals.

I am curious as to why the companion should be aged 18 or more. How is that to be established? If the companion is an immediate relation or is entitled to vote in the election, he or she may be on the list of electors and therefore obviously over 18, but if the companion is from some distance away, or is simply missing from the register for whatever reason, there is no way that the presiding officer, who apparently has to make the decision in such cases, can know whether the person is over 18 or not. He or she could be 16 or 17. There is therefore a potential difficulty.

I do not understand why one elector can assist two people. In Northern Ireland, one can act as a witness for only one individual—even a member of one's family—who applies for a postal or proxy vote. As the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland knows, that has caused all sorts of problems. It would be preferable if the person—a family member or party worker, who is often known to the electoral officers—could assist, or witness papers for any number of people. That would facilitate checking whether the papers and applications were genuine. I do not understand why the restriction is necessary.

I tabled an amendment—No. 110, which was not called—to discover why there has to be a declaration, which is presumably signed, in the polling station when the vote is cast. At 10 am, there are not many people in the polling station. However, at 8 pm or 9 pm, an enormous number of people might be waiting to vote. They will not want any sort of delay. Having to make a declaration will create a delay. Why does the Bill provide that people have to sign a piece of paper, which the presiding officer has to accept, before they can vote?

I hope that the Minister has a reasonable answer to those points. If not, perhaps he will reconsider them, because there are problems with the provision.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman made several interesting points, which deserve consideration. I should like to give them that consideration and, if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I shall write to him about the issues that he raised.

The provision attempts to assist voters who may benefit from being accompanied. I hope that we can take account of some of the hon. Gentleman's points, tackle them through correspondence and perhaps discuss them later.

Mr. Ross: In the light of the Minister's response, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 13 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 14 and 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16

CITATION, CONSTRUCTION, COMMENCEMENT AND EXTENT

Amendment made: No. 92, in page 17, line 16, leave out "extends" and insert

"and paragraph 1ZA of Schedule 5 extend".—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Clause 16, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 5

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendments made: No. 93, in page 39, line 28, at end insert—

"City of London (Various Powers) Act 1957 (c. x)

1ZA.—(1) Section 8 of the City of London (Various Powers) Act 1957 (manner of voting at ward elections) is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (1) (application of provisions of 1983 Act), after the entry relating to section 3 of the 1983 Act insert—

"section 3A (disfranchisement of offenders detained in mental hospitals);".

(3) In subsection (2), (application of provisions about absent voting) for "sections 5 to 9 and 12(3) and (4) of the Representation of the People Act 1985" substitute "Schedule 4 to the Representation of the People Act 2000".

(4) In subsections (4) and (5) (supplementary provisions), for "1985" (wherever occurring) substitute "2000".".

No. 94, in page 41, line 34, at end insert—

"Finance Act 1996 (c. 8)

14. In section 200 of the Finance Act 1996 (domicile for tax purposes of overseas electors), in subsection (3)(a), for the words from "mentioned in" to "section 1" substitute "of parliamentary electors in pursuance of such a declaration as is mentioned in section 1(1)(a)".".—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Schedule 5, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 6

REPEALS

Amendments made: No. 95, in page 42, line 23, column 3, at end insert—

"Section 11(b) (except the final "and").	
In Schedule 2, paragraph 5 and Part II.".	

No. 96, in page 42, line 27, leave out "and 18' and insert ", 18 and 78".

No. 97, in page 42, line 27, at end insert—

"1989 c. 3.	Elected Authorities (Northern Ireland) Act 1989.	Section 11(8). In section 13(7), the words ", except section 11(8),".
1989 c. 28.	Representation of the People Act 1989.	Sections 1 to 4.".

No. 98, in page 42, line 29, at end insert—

"1994 c. 19.	Local Government (Wales) Act 1994.	In Schedule 16, paragraph 74(1).".

No. 99, in page 42, line 35, at end insert—

"1999 c. 1.	European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999.	In Schedule 3, paragraph 3.".

No. 100, in page 43, line 6, column 3, at beginning insert "Section 11(1).".—*[Mr. Mike O'Brien.]*

Schedule 6, as amended, agreed to.

New Clause 2

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR REGISTRATION WHEN ELECTION ANNOUNCED

".—In paragraph 28(1) of Schedule 1 to the principal Act, for the words "as soon as practicable" there shall be substituted the words "within four days of the dissolution of Parliament" and the following paragraph shall be added—

"3A.—(1) The returning officer shall forthwith notify the registration officer that he has issued the official poll cards.

(2) When the registration officer has been notified by the returning officer of the issue of official poll cards for any election, he shall, in at least two newspapers circulating widely in his area, a local radio station and otherwise as he considers fit, place advertisements—

(a) requesting persons failing to receive official poll cards to check that their names are on the register; and

(b) setting out a form on which application may be made for registration.".".—*[Mr. Barnes.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

7.15 pm

Mr. Barnes: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

My interest has always been to try to get as full a franchise as we can from those who are eligible to be placed on registers. The new clause seeks the early issue of polling cards and a great deal of publicity about their issue to alert people to the fact that polling cards are available. Those cards should tell people whether they are on the register and if they do not receive one they need to check their position. Some may be on the register, but others should still have the opportunity to get themselves registered.

My problem, because my previous amendments have been lost, is that at general elections there is only a small window of opportunity—between the dissolution of Parliament and the close of nominations—for people to get themselves on to electoral registers. That is the last point at which registers could be published. Had previous amendments been accepted, there would have been much wider opportunities for getting people on to registers.

Mr. Simon Hughes: This is an all-party new clause and I hope that the Minister will respond favourably to it. There are two issues: making sure that proper publicity is given to the process and to people's entitlement to vote, which we have all argued for in different ways, and balancing that with the fact that people should know that they do not need a polling card to vote. One of the great questions that we are all asked is, "I haven't had a card, so will I be allowed to vote?" We all say, "Yes, go along and give your name and address." We must strike a balance: we must get it across to people that they should be on the electoral register, but we must also tell them that, although they should check beforehand if they are concerned, or talk to someone and get on the list in the days remaining, they should go to vote anyway if they think that they should be on the list.

I hope that the spirit, if not the drafting, of the new clause will find favour with the Minister. On behalf of the Members from all three parties who tabled it, I hope that we can do more to make sure that there is not the confusion, and the resultant inaction, that we have too often heard about from our constituents and other electors.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Although the new clause has been tabled for good reasons, it contains a number of pitfalls. The obligation on returning officers to send out the official poll card for a general election within four days of the dissolution of Parliament would put, even in these days of computer technology, a great deal of stress and pressure on officers, who have to provide hundreds of thousands of poll cards. Sometimes that takes several days merely to organise. The timing of general elections is uncertain and there are plenty of examples of Prime Ministers calling snap general elections. There have been very brief periods between such announcements and dissolution.

Mr. Evans: Is that a hint?

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman asks from a sedentary position whether that is a hint. I am afraid I do not know, but it is not intended as such. Returning officers have told us that the new clause would place such a heavy burden on them that they could not comply with such time scales. Given that the motives of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) and those who support him are sincere and in many ways laudable, perhaps it would be useful to discuss the proposal with my officials. Although I cannot support the new clause, I hope to be able to consider the idea behind it and write to him and his supporters in due course.

Mr. Barnes: I am happy to have that idea examined and hope that some of the other amendments that I tabled, which tied in with the new clause and would have allowed people who have not been fully registered to get back on registers, will be taken into account. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 6

OFFICIAL MARK ON BALLOT PAPER

".—In Schedule 1 (Parliamentary Elections Rules) of the 1983 Act, Rule 20 shall be omitted.".—*[Mr. Linton.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Linton: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The new clause embodies a recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee to abolish the antiquated and entirely pointless practice of placing an official perforated mark on ballot papers before they are handed to electors. At the previous election, 2,169 voters were disfranchised—their votes rejected—simply because the official mark had been left off the ballot paper by mistake. Indeed, that very nearly happened to me. The polling station clerk was momentarily distracted—perhaps because I was the candidate, but I do not know—and handed me the ballot paper without franking it. Fortunately, the presiding officer was at her left shoulder to remind her of that. It made no difference to me, but it did at Winchester, where an election was won by two votes. The Conservative candidate later had the result declared null and void, on the pedantic basis that he would have won if the unfranked papers had been rejected. The voters made clear what they thought of that by increasing the original winner's majority from two to, I think, 28,000; but the by-election probably cost the parties about a quarter of a million pounds.

What has the official mark achieved? In the last five elections, it has led to the rejection of 13,000 ballot papers as a result of human error. That is not a criticism of the clerks; the job is very dull and, in terms of percentages, the number of unfranked papers is very small. It is easy to forget, partly because it is such a pointless exercise. Who wants the official mark? Chief executives want it to be abolished in favour of watermarking or bar coding; the Liberal Democrats say that it should be abolished, and that numbering of ballot papers is sufficient; the Conservatives say that they would not oppose the investigation of a different method of marking ballot papers. That is what they told the Home Affairs Committee.

The Committee had recommended the abolition of franking twice, first in its 1982 report and then in its 1998 report. On both occasions, the recommendation was unanimous. When the deputy chairman of the Association of Electoral Administrators gave evidence to the Committee, he was asked what change in the electoral system he would most like to see. He said that he would like the official mark to be abolished. So far, the Home Office has merely said that the matter requires reconsideration.

I hope that the Minister will tell us that he will try to persuade the Home Office to take this small step. In many respects, our elections are still conducted as they were in the Victorian era. That is the view of the election administrators themselves. The franking machine is the most Victorian of our electoral practices: it causes endless hassle for polling station clerks, thousands of disqualified voters at every election, and unnecessary by-elections such as the one at Winchester, and achieves absolutely nothing. I hope that Ministers will tell the registration officers to use watermarked papers, or whatever security method they consider appropriate; but for goodness sake, let us get rid of the franking machines.

Mr. O'Brien: The Home Affairs Committee said that there should be some mark or identifier on ballot papers to enable forgers to be detected, and suggested that the Home Office and electoral administrators should try to find a more up-to-date method, and should stamp each ballot paper individually.

I have considerable sympathy with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton), but I cannot accept the amendment at this stage, because we have not sorted out the alternative mark or identifier, and I think that we need to study the position further. I hope that, having heard that, my hon. Friend will feel able to withdraw the motion. We hope to write to him explaining how we shall deal with the matter in due course.

Mr. Linton: I am not convinced that we need to decide on a new method of security before abolishing franking. The returning officer at the Winchester by-election made the holes in the ballot papers with a fork. The notion that franking has any security value in this day and age is ludicrous. It may have worked as a security method in 1872, when it was introduced, but it is not secure any more. By all means let us have a more secure system, but we might as well get rid of the franking machine right now.

In the circumstances, however, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn

Bill reported, with amendments.

PETITIONS

Farming (East Anglia)

7.24 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): I present a petition to the House that enjoys cross-party support in East Anglia. It is composed of 1,450 signatures. The most remarkable thing is that it is not from members of the public, but from farmers themselves. Given the number of farmers in East Anglia who are affected by the scheme, practically 100 per cent. have signed the petition.

The farmers are concerned that, in the whole of East Anglia, there is no slaughterhouse operating the over-30-months scheme. They are desperately concerned that that will cause extra suffering to cattle that are to be slaughtered. The petition reads:

To the House of Commons

The Petition of Farmers in the Parliamentary Constituency of Brentwood and Ongar and from the area of East Anglia

Declares that we are distressed at the removal of the Over Thirty Months Scheme slaughter facilities at Cheale Meats Limited at Brentwood and the lack of proper alternative facilities within our geographical location.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to examine the decision made by the Intervention Board depriving East Anglia of this badly needed facility.

And the Petitioners remain etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Child Labour

Mr. Andy King (Rugby and Kenilworth): The petition that I present was given me by a group of young people in Rugby following their Christmas cracker appeal. They were part of the Big Take youth project initiative "Shout for justice and campaign for freedom." Those young

[Mr. Andy King]

people wish to bring to the House's attention their concerns about the fate of young people throughout the world. The petition states:

This Petition of the people of Rugby Warwickshire and others, declares that Her Majesty's Government has ratified the convention on the rights of the child and is therefore committed to children's rights and therefore has a responsibility to do all it can to help end the exploitation of child labourers in overseas countries.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons should urge the Secretary of State for International Development that all aid to such countries as Indonesia, India, Mali and Pakistan where child labour is known to be an extensive problem should have a reasonable percentage of aid linked to a programme of education for the child labourers.

To lie upon the Table.

NHS (West Surrey)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

7.27 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I am grateful to the Speaker for choosing for debate the subject of the health service in west Surrey, just as I am to my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) and to my hon. Friends the Members for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) and for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), whose constituents are as affected as mine are by the intolerable crisis that is threatening our region.

West Surrey is often described—it is so again in the latest documents from our health authority—as the healthiest and wealthiest part of Britain. Why then do we have a hospital with the longest accident and emergency admission times of any hospital in the country? If we are the healthiest and wealthiest, why do we have a health authority with the most people waiting up to 18 months, with many critical cases almost going over that period as I speak?

In west Surrey, we pay the highest taxes per head of any part of the UK, yet we have the lowest health spending per head of any part of the UK. We are not asking for special treatment, but we deserve a fair deal for the people whom we represent.

As I speak, the chief executive of West Surrey health authority is meeting doctors and nurses at the local hospital in Guildford to explain the latest round of cuts that are being imposed on our service as a result of the Government's attitude up to now and of the cuts that they are imposing on our finances. That cannot be due to wastefulness or inefficiency, because we have some of the United Kingdom's most efficient hospitals. Figures released last week by the NHS executive showed that both Frimley Park and the Royal Surrey were among the country's most efficient hospitals.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): My hon. Friend has just mentioned Frimley Park hospital, which is in my own constituency. Does he agree that primary care groups in the West Surrey health area have particular concerns in addition to the ones that he has been describing? Will he confirm that he has met the chairman of the Camberley primary care group, Dr. Geoff Roberts—to whom I have spoken—who is particularly concerned that his pleas to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health to resist cuts—particularly a £500,000 cut—in local child health services have fallen on deaf ears?

Will my hon. Friend also confirm that there is particular concern that the number of district nurses is about to be cut, and that another £150,000 will be cut from district nursing? As they are the very people who deal with terminally ill cancer patients and administer influenza vaccinations, is that not of particular concern?

Mr. St. Aubyn: My hon. Friend has made the case extremely well. Dr. Roberts, many other doctors and nurses, and many of our constituents have been writing to west Surrey Members about the depth of their concern at the crisis we are facing.

We have outstanding staff and management in our local health service. They do an incredible job, but they are being asked to do it under impossible conditions. We have an accident and emergency unit serving a catchment area around Guildford of 250,000 people, but it is now under threat of closure. In the past two years, a quarter of the beds in our local health system have been scrapped. As my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) said, in the next 12 months, 16 of our full-time-equivalent nurse posts in the community will be taken away from us.

Recently, a vital study revealed how Croydon was affected by similar cuts, and made it clear that such cuts only store up more problems for the future, as carers at home realise that they cannot cope and ask that their family member be admitted to hospital instead.

In some cases, people waiting for critical heart tests have been asked to wait too long. X-rays for cancer used to be brought back immediately, but there is now a wait of up to two months, while patients develop complications. Physiotherapy—a preventive medicine—was always immediately available, but there is now an eight-week wait before it can be given. Although the situation is unsustainable, demand has been stable. The number of emergency admissions at the Royal Surrey has risen by only 3 per cent. in the past two years.

On a typical day at the Royal Surrey County hospital, nine or 10 elective cases are cancelled, many of whom have reached the 18-month maximum wait or are urgent cancer cases. Before the Christmas flu outbreak, I was given access to internal papers describing one typical day. On 2 December, 18 cases—10 cancer cases and eight long-waiters—were to be admitted for elective surgery, but only nine beds were available. So six long waiters and three cancer cases had to be sent home—in direct contravention of all the aspirations that Conservative Members always had for the NHS, and which we thought that we shared with Labour Members.

Does the Minister think that the patients who were sent home on that day were—according to her formula, which tells the Government that we are asking for too much in our area—part of the excess health demand in west Surrey? Is she happy that the Government are sending away 18-month and cancer cases—which the previous Government decided to pay for, although the formula told us that we should not? We felt that it was more important to listen to Surrey's doctors than to a formula devised, 10 years ago, by professors in York.

We know how the previous Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), skewed the formula even further against our area. Nine years ago, Gateshead and Guildford had similar per capita funding. Now Gateshead is funded at 30 per cent. more than Guildford. I do not resent for one moment the benefits that that is producing for the people of Gateshead—one of the poorest areas of our country. I am however asking the Minister and the Government to recognise that, in the fast lane of Britain's economy, we have our own health pressures and our own health needs which must be seen to.

The overspending, as it was called, that we have lost in Surrey over the past four years amounts to £8 million a year. It came to more than that in some years. We broke even in one year—1998-99—but that was the year when waiting lists got ever longer and we simply stored up more trouble for the future. Our case is that the £8 million so-called overspend reflects the true level of demand in our area. We need an immediate adjustment to the Government's figures to reflect the real needs of the people whom we represent.

Yesterday in the House, the Prime Minister accused the Conservatives of hatching a policy that means that

> "anyone facing one of a number of non-urgent operations, including cataracts . . . will be forced to take out private health insurance."—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 275.]

I have a letter from a constituent whose wife waited so long for her cataract operations that she went blind in both eyes. That is when he was forced, with no insurance policy, to go private and have the operation done for her. That is how the Government are forcing people in our area to go private.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I can strongly confirm what my hon. Friend is saying. When a woman has to wait four months and two cancellations before vaginal cancer is detected, when someone has to wait almost 18 months for a hysterectomy, when we find that the out-patient wait just to see an orthopaedic consultant has gone from three or four months to nine months, when people are waiting in casualty not for 24 hours, but for three, four or even five days, local people ask what the message is. If the Government are forcing people to go privately by stealth, let them at least have the courage to say so. People are facing a sharply deteriorating service. They are frightened for themselves. Professionals are in despair. Things have gone far enough. It is time the Government listened and realised the damage that is being inflicted on people throughout our area.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for reminding us that people are being forced to go private and it is the old, the sick and the very poor who bear the brunt of the Government's policies because they have no alternative. At least when we had a policy of encouraging private care we did it through a tax incentive, which this Government took away. We warned at the time that that would create the greatest pressure in the areas of greatest take-up. That is what has happened in west Surrey in the past two years.

Our local health authority is still saying that at every opportunity local specialists should encourage people to use the private sector. Item 5 of the latest NHS document states:

> "People who have other entitlements to health care should make maximum use of them."

That is the Government's answer to the health problems of west Surrey—they are telling people that they can all afford to go private. Not all our constituents can afford it, however.

We provided an incentive to expand the private sector. This Government are providing a penalty. Tragically, in some cases it is a death penalty. Andy Williams was 29 years old when he developed a serious heart complaint. His specialist at the Royal Surrey hospital wrote to me to say that two years ago it would have been diagnosed within three months. Because the waiting times

[Mr. St. Aubyn]

for that diagnosis have gone up to nearly a year, Andy died before he could be dealt with. His parents live in South Africa. His father wrote to me to say:

"fortunately in Durban our medical set up at the present time is still very good. The cardiologists here with rooms at a hospital have access to this equipment, and this facility is available to all."

Truly, in west Surrey, as in some other parts of the country, we have sunk to a third-world service for our constituents.

I could cite many other cases. Many people have written to my colleagues and me. The Government's desire to achieve their targets for waiting lists has resulted in a long list of people who have suffered, some of whom are no longer with us.

That is why I have three key demands for the Minister. First, will she make it clear that the Government will safeguard the future of the present accident and emergency units at Frimley Park and the Royal Surrey in Guildford, as well as the excellent new facility at St. Peter's, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge? That would relieve a great deal of anxiety about the effects of such a closure.

Secondly, is she prepared to waive the £18 million so-called deficit from the time of the previous Government, when we recognised the need for health care in Surrey based on what the doctors were telling us, rather than on the formula? How can it be right that patients this year should pay a penalty—in the form of having to repay that money—just because previous patients were properly looked after under a Conservative Government?

Thirdly, out of the many extra pots of money that the Government have given themselves to make discretionary payments, will the Minister authorise the money that we need to get our real waiting lists and waiting times in line? She may be aware that a new admissions unit at a budget cost of £250,000 is due to be opened in the next few weeks. We very much hope that she will be the first Minister this Parliament to visit the Royal Surrey and our health region and hear what is going on. When she does so, will she make sure that the new unit does not have to close at the beginning of the next financial year, as according to the latest document from the health authority, absolutely no money is available to fund it?

Allan Willett, chairman of the South East of England development agency, confirmed to me again today that that organisation recognises the vital importance of a proper health service to keeping our local economy thriving and attracting inward investment. We ask the Minister to act not just in the interests of our constituents, but so that we can continue to pay our very large share for the services that are required up and down the country through the taxes that we pay. If Surrey is to continue to be the powerhouse of the British economy, we must have the support services that we need to maintain ourselves under the pressures that that creates.

Ten years ago, the previous Government introduced a new allocation of funds favouring Labour areas at the expense of Conservative ones. We are asking the present Government to be equally bipartisan and to recognise that the effects of that formula have gone too far and need to be reined in. In the interests of justice, fairness and the reputation of the Minister and the Government, I ask her to listen.

7.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) on securing tonight's debate on NHS provision in west Surrey.

Conservative Members are doing the national health service and those working in it a great disservice by continually criticising those who tirelessly and on a daily basis work hard for their communities. Just to put the record straight, let me take the opportunity to thank everyone in the NHS, including those in west Surrey, on behalf of the House for their tremendous work over the winter period. They coped with extra pressure due to flu and the extended holiday over Christmas and the millennium. That needed to be put on record.

The Government are committed to a high-quality NHS wherever our citizens live. Our principle is that the very best should be available to everyone. The previous Government did their very best to dismantle and erode that principle.

Tonight's debate is about west Surrey, but I cannot reply without at least in part drawing on the national picture. In 1997, we inherited a disgraceful state of affairs. There were record waiting lists, which were rising, and debts were being built up year after year. Nationally, they amounted to £450 million and a £20 million deficit had built up in west Surrey. The number of nurses training had been cut and investment in building was the lowest in 10 years. The system set doctor against doctor and hospital against hospital and the pay system was archaic and inflexible.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: If the hon. Lady is right, having praised NHS staff, why is she now challenging their credibility? I have here letters from doctors throughout the area saying that waiting times have increased dramatically since her party came to power. It has shut 111 beds and there are more than 300 nurse vacancies. If the situation was so bad and is now so good, why should all those doctors be writing with such strong feelings and why have we had unprecedented numbers of complaints from patients and their families who are in despair?

Ms Stuart: If the right hon. Lady would care to listen to the rest of my speech, I will answer some of her questions. She has on previous occasions raised individual cases in the House and I have invited her formally to follow up those cases, but she has not written to me. Similarly, accusations were made earlier about waiting times in casualty departments of four to five days. If that has happened, perhaps she would do me the courtesy of writing to me about such cases.

Mrs. Bottomley: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I gave the Secretary of State for Health the details of those cases when I met him before Christmas—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The right hon. Lady knows that that is a point of debate. This is a half-hour Adjournment debate raised by the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) about a specific matter relating to his constituency and everyone would do better to direct their thoughts and words to that subject.

Ms Stuart: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Things are starting to change after the disgraceful situation that

we inherited. Investment in accident and emergency has increased, waiting lists are lower than they were in 1997 and falling. Waiting times will improve. We have seen the highest level of nurse recruitment and an expansion in the role played by nurses. More money has been made available for suspected cancer patients and cardiac patients. We have a 10-year programme.

Great concern has been expressed forcefully tonight by hon. Members about the situation in west Surrey. West Surrey health authority has spent more than its allocation. It had to be bailed out two years ago when it ran up a huge deficit to the tune of £18 million, and that has to be repaid because this Government are interested in a sustainable and long-term investment.

The current funding allocation for West Surrey health authority for 1999–2000—the hon. Member for Guildford said that he wanted a fair system—is £371 million, which is a cash increase of £19.3 million, or 5.48 per cent. That is £8.5 million, or 2.35 per cent., more than the fair share target. The allocation per weighted head of population in west Surrey is £643, but the national average in England is £629. For 2000-01, the south-east region will receive £5.4 billion and west Surrey will receive £394 million, which is a cash increase of £23.2 million or 6.2 per cent.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Does the Minister understand that all those weighted figures go back to the same flawed formula that said that Surrey was overspending when it was simply meeting core health needs? Does she further understand that by demanding back that £18 million she has not put any new money into the system?

Ms Stuart: Conservative Members continually call for more money for their constituents, but do not vote for more money for the NHS and they call our proposals to increase cash for the NHS reckless. We want long-term, decent investment in the health service. I fully agree that future allocations should be fairer, but they must be fair for everyone.

We are reviewing the weighted capitation formula because we want it to be fairer, but it must provide for the NHS of the future. At the moment, the review is at an early stage and further changes are frozen until 2002 because we want some stability and certainty in the system. Even with the generous funding for west Surrey, change is still needed. Conservative Members portray the situation as driven simply by financial needs, but that is not the case. We expect the health authority to fulfil its statutory duty to live within its means, but other changes need to be made in west Surrey to bring the service up to date, and to take into account changes in medical practice, technology and the training needs of doctors

The health authority needs to live within its means and changes are needed to achieve that quickly. That means some hard choices, because west Surrey deserves a service that is modern, sustainable and affordable and that meets the needs of the people of west Surrey. A number of proposed changes are in hand.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister say on which of the nine cases that I described there has been overspending?

Ms Stuart: Changes in the service structure have to be made to deal with such matters. West Surrey does not have a sustainable health economy. Consultation on some of the long-term changes is already complete. I have taken careful note of the objections made by the community health council to the changes at the Ashford hospital and at St. Peter's hospital, and an announcement will be made soon.

I see that the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) has a copy of the document "Ensuring a Sustainable NHS—Phase II". That document asks for comments, and I hope that all hon. Members affected by the consultation process will respond. We are also in the process of setting up an independent advisory panel, which will help to ensure local consensus on the changes.

Somehow, the good news seems to escape the consciousness radar of Conservative Members. I shall describe some of the investment that has been made in west Surrey. Between June 1997 and October 1999, the number of day cases and the in-patient waiting list fell by 13 per cent. Between 1996 and 1999, there was a 21 per cent. increase in the number of out-patients attended to. An extra £3 million was devoted to reducing in-patient and day cases. A further £351,000 has already been spent to reduce out-patient waiting times, and £1.2 million has been invested in local accident and emergency departments. The Royal Surrey hospital received £276,000 for a new admissions unit.

Those changes in the provision were necessary to achieve a sustainable health service. Frimley Park hospital received more than £500,000 for new X-ray and IT equipment. The Ashford, St. Peter's and Frimley Park hospitals, in conjunction with local GPs, took part in one of the pilot projects for on-the-spot booking. Under that system, when patients visit out-patient clinics, doctors are able to book dates for operations. In addition, GPs are able to make out-patient appointments, with the result that dates are arranged to suit the convenience of patients.

A new primary care centre serving Weybridge and Woking is now operational. Investment of about £4 million has been made in health centre facilities and community hospital services. A pilot for a primary care walk-in centre is being developed in Weybridge, and NHS Direct is already available in south-west Surrey. Conservative Members smile at NHS Direct, but it has had a huge impact in the area.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The core of the NHS are the acute and nursing services. Will the Minister address the question of how they are being decimated in the area?

Ms Stuart: Fundamental changes have to be made to the health economy. We are putting in extra money to accomplish those changes. Claims that west Surrey never gets the extra money that it applies for are not substantiated, as the list that I have given proves. Hospitals have made tremendous progress in recruiting nurses. The previous Administration slashed the numbers of nurses in training. We are providing extra training places and recruiting extra nurses.

Eighteen months ago, the vacancy factor at the Royal Surrey hospital was 17 per cent., which meant that the hospital was lacking 310 qualified nurses. By next month, the factor will have fallen to 10 per cent. That huge

[Ms Stuart]

improvement must be recognised. At its recent open day, the hospital recruited another 11 nurses who wanted to return to work.

Social services spending in Surrey has increased by 4.9 per cent., compared with a national average of 4.4 per cent. The claim that west Surrey does not get its fair share of money simply does not stand up when we look at the figures.

I should like to take up the hon. Gentleman's invitation to come to west Surrey. I know that accusations have been made in the House that Ministers never visit west Surrey, but I am very happy to do so. More to the point, I thought that it was very fitting to choose St. Valentine's day, 14 February, to visit the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 17 January 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Prison Overcrowding

1. **Mr. Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington): How many prisons are overcrowded. [103961]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): Measures of overcrowding vary. At the end of November 1999, based on the measure preferred by the Prison Reform Trust, 62 establishments exceeded their uncrowded capacity. However, no prisons exceeded their safe maximum capacity.

Mr. Brake: Will the Minister confirm whether it is to become official Government policy to use prison hulks to tackle overcrowding? Will the life of HMP Weare be extended beyond the agreed finish date of 2003? Is he actively looking at whether HMS Invincible could be used as a hulk ship, as reported in the weekend's press?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman ought not to believe everything that he reads in the press—even in *Focus*. HMP Weare has proved to be an unalloyed success, and we have made no final decision about its future. We will ensure that the courts have at their disposal all the accommodation necessary to hold prisoners safely and securely. We are determined to hold prisoners in that way, not least because our concern—unlike that of the Liberal Democrats—is not, first and foremost, the number of people in prison, but how best we reduce crime.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): What are we doing to empty the prisons of the mentally ill?

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend will be aware that we have instituted a programme of reform of prison health care. One of the main strands of that is to improve communication and co-operation between the NHS and the Prison Service, precisely to identify more speedily and readily places in medium secure and high secure units for those who more properly belong there.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Minister will be aware of the strong feeling in north and mid-Wales that there is no local prison, and that the prisons serving the area are inconvenient, with prisoners not in their own communities. If there is a need for additional prison capacity, will he look at the possibility of an additional prison in north and mid-Wales and of using European funds to help finance it?

Mr. Boateng: I would be delighted to do that. On my visits to Wales—including visits to prisons—I have been made aware of the sentiment in relation to the need for more local provision. I have had some communication on the issue with the Assembly Members concerned and I will bear the right hon. Gentleman's suggestion in mind.

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Does not the management of prison capacity have undesirable side-effects, such as the movement of prisoners hundreds of miles away from their friends and relatives? Does it not disrupt education programmes? Will my right hon. Friend look at those difficulties?

Mr. Boateng: We have in mind the need to make sure that we locate prisoners as near as possible to their family centres and that we take steps to ensure that the reintegration and rehabilitation of prisoners is not undermined by capacity issues. My hon. Friend will appreciate the operational imperatives in terms of ensuring that we have a system that is suitably flexible to enable us to hold prisoners in conditions of safety and security. He will be aware that we have reduced overcrowding in our prisons from the high level that we inherited. However, there is no room for complacency and we keep a close eye on the figures.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I welcome the Minister's statement that HMP Weare has been a resounding success, given all that Labour said about the use of a ship when we introduced it. What percentage of prisoners are in cells designed for one prisoner, but being used by two? What percentage of prisoners are in cells designed for two prisoners, but being shared by three? In how many prisons has slopping out returned—on however limited a scale—as a result of bringing back into use old accommodation?

Mr. Boateng: It was my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary who brought HMP Weare into play, and it was he who took steps to solve the problem of prison overcrowding. Before the right hon. Lady casts any strictures in our direction, she should consider her own record in government. In 1996–97, prisons were at 106.2 per cent. capacity; now the figure is 105.6 per cent.—it is lower. There is worse: in 1997–98, the last year for which the Conservatives had stewardship of the Prison Service, the figure was 108.1 per cent. The right hon. Lady is in no position to cast aspersions in our direction. We are on course to meet—

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): What about answering the question?

Mr. Boateng: The right hon. Gentleman should not get so aerated. If only he would contain himself, we would come to the answer.

In 1990–91, under Conservative stewardship, the average number of prisoners held three to a cell designed for one was 2,677. That number has certainly not been

exceeded today. The figure is on target for the key performance indicator by which one measures the number of prisoners in overcrowded cells. We are clearing up the mess that the Conservatives left us.

Miss Widdecombe: The Minister must be hard of hearing. What percentage of the prison population is sharing two to a cell designed for one? I shall ask the questions very slowly so that he can look up the answers. What percentage of the prison population is sharing three to a cell designed for two? In how many prisons has slopping out, which we eliminated completely, returned as a result of bringing old accommodation back into use? Those are three simple questions. If he does not know the answers, let him admit it; but I always knew the answers to such questions when I was in his position.

Mr. Boateng: The right hon. Lady might have known the answers, but she did nothing to tackle the problem. We are tackling it, and I will write to her with the specific answers that she seeks.

Miss Widdecombe: We take it from that that the Minister does not know the answers to three simple questions.

I do not know whether it is true that the Prison Service is considering the use of aircraft carriers. If it is looking for temporary accommodation, that suggests a shortfall in prison places. I have two very simple questions: is the Minister planning any additional permanent accommodation over and above that already announced; and, if so, how does he intend to pay for it, given the very clear statement of the then Chief Secretary, the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn), who said in a letter to the Home Secretary that he would entertain no further claims on the reserve for the purposes of easing pressures in overcrowded prisons?

Mr. Boateng: The right hon. Lady need have no fear about the availability of funds for building the new prisons needed to fulfil the requirements that the courts impose on the system by way of holding prisoners in safe and secure conditions. We have three prisons currently under construction—Forest Bank, Onley II and Marchington—and there are plans for three more at Ashford, Peterborough and Ashworth. Those will all be funded and will fulfil the current requirements for the prison population.

Last year, 67,800 prison places were required. In 2001–02, we will have 71,400 places. That is what the Government are doing to address the under-resourcing of the Prison Service under the right hon. Lady's stewardship. We face up to the problems and address them, while ensuring that we also address the causes of crime: she and her Government flunked them.

Public Safety Radio Communications Project

2. **Mr. Crispin Blunt** (Reigate): What estimate he has made of the impact on police budgets of the Public Safety Radio Communications Project. [103962]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Some £5 million has been provided from the police grant for the next financial year. Once the service is fully operational, the cost is estimated to be around £150 million per year at today's prices, which will be equivalent to some 2 per cent. of police authority budgets. The cost will be reduced by the £50 million subsidy that I announced last September, and will also be taken into account in the overall level of resources provided for the police service in future years. The new digital radio and data system is of great importance to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of front-line police officers.

Mr. Blunt: While one accepts that the new system will improve the police's communication capacity, does not part of the need for it derive from the fact that the Government have sold off part of the radio spectrum? The Home Secretary mentioned costs of £150 million a year, but the total cost will be some £1.5 billion, of which the Government will produce the generous amount of £50 million from the central budget. When will Surrey have the benefit of the new radio system, and what will be the consequences for Surrey's budget of having to pay for that Government-imposed requirement? Over the next few years, Surrey will move from having the best crime prevention rates in the country and a good funding settlement to having the worst funding settlement—the Home Secretary has offered to meet me to discuss that.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman is misinformed about the background to the project. It has arisen not because we have sold off the radio spectrum but because the Government whom he supported agreed, in the mid-1990s, that the spectrum for the police service should change under the terms of an EU directive. A digital radio and data system that will cover the whole country is a vital need for the police service. It will become operational in all police services by 2004, although I cannot give him a precise date for Surrey. The cost will be £150 million a year, which adds up to £1.5 billion over the life of the project. We have already found £50 million from the capital modernisation fund for the immediate costs and, of course, as we agree funding for the police service—including for Surrey—for subsequent years, we will take fully into account the costs of the capital radio project.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): In my experience, the only people who will not welcome this investment in proper technological support for the police are the criminals. If we ensure that the police have such support, they will do their job much more effectively. Does my right hon. Friend accept that, in the past 20 years, the pattern of investment in all technology has been patchy and that this Government need to address those areas in which money was not invested in the past to try to bring the police force up to a reasonable standard within a reasonable time?

Mr. Straw: I entirely accept my hon. Friend's comments. Investment in technology for the police service has been made in the past. Some of that investment has been successful, but some has not, not least because the decisions have been left to individual police services, which has sometimes led to incompatible radio and IT

systems. That is why it is essential for the future that, as far as possible, large IT projects such as the police radio project are co-ordinated on a national basis.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): It is true that the radio communications project is welcomed by the police and that a contribution will be made to it from central funds. However, can the Home Secretary yet tell us whether he has made a decision about future general funding to pay for the project and for the police recruitment that he plans? He has announced £35 million from the crime-fighting fund for next year; it will cost at least £150 million to recruit 5,000 police officers, let alone to keep them on after that. When will both the Met—whose outgoing Commissioner has warned of the problem—and the rest of the police forces know that they have the money guaranteed to ensure that they have a real-terms increase in funds, not a real-terms cut?

Mr. Straw: The only period in the past 10 years when there was a real-terms cut in police service funding occurred in, I think, 1995–96, under the previous Administration. We have set out firm spending plans for the year 2000–01. Additionally, for that year, we have allocated this extra £35 million as the first slice to pay for the 5,000 additional officers. The money for the following years will be announced as part of the spending review 2000, which will be announced later this year.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Will not 80 per cent. of the £1.4 billion that this important radio project costs be paid by police authorities, through the common police services budget? That decision has already been taken, but the costs come on top of the shortfall of £1.2 billion in police funding over the next three years predicted by the police service forecasting group, working on behalf of the police authorities. I think that the right hon. Gentleman will receive the group's findings any day now. They show that the police service cannot afford to meet the radio project costs without further cuts in the number of police officers.

When will the Home Secretary face up to the reality of the worst funding crisis for our police service in living memory? The issue may not have prompted the press mauling that the right hon. Gentleman has suffered recently in connection with other matters, but if he does not punch his weight more effectively with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he will be on the canvas and counted out.

Mr. Straw: That was a rather ropy question.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that that 80 per cent. of the costs will be paid from the central police grant and that deductions will be made in the grant. That is the only rational way to fund the project. However, I have already made clear what funding will be announced for 2001 and thereafter.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the most difficult time that police forces face. In response, I can do no better than to quote Mr. Paul Scott-Lee, the chief constable of Suffolk. Speaking about our crime-fighting fund and the 5,000 extra officers, he said that his force had had its

"most difficult time about five years ago."

That was when real-terms spending on the police went down, not up.

Crime Figures (Kent)

3. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): If he will make a statement on the most recent crime figures for Kent. [103963]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The latest figures, covering the 12 months to September 1999, will be published tomorrow. I hope that they will show continued strong performance in reducing crime in Kent.

Dr. Ladyman: I am grateful for that answer, and especially for the Government's recognition of Kent's status as the gateway to Europe, which places an additional burden of crime on the local police. However, is my hon. Friend aware that some senior policemen in Kent believe that the criminal networks set up to bootleg alcohol and tobacco are now involved in smuggling illegal immigrants, pornography and drugs into the country? One senior officer has likened that trade to the evolution of organised crime in the United States in the early days of prohibition.

Will my hon. Friend ensure that he continues to monitor crime figures in Kent? Will he also ensure that Kent police have the money needed to combat this very worrying threat?

Mr. Clarke: I am aware of the issues raised by my hon. Friend, and I have discussed them with senior police officers in Kent. In fact, the other day I discussed those very matters—organised crime, smuggling and trafficking in people—with the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche). We also discussed how those crimes impacted on the people of Kent.

My hon. Friend makes a good point. I assure him that we will keep the question of organised crime in Kent—the gateway to Europe—under close review.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I share the Minister's hope that tomorrow's figures will show a further reduction in crime in Kent. Since 1994, crime in the county has reduced by 16 per cent. However, has the Minister had an opportunity to study last week's letter to the Home Secretary from the chairman of the Kent police authority? In it, she points out that the Home Secretary's decision on the funding of the radio project referred to in the previous question means that Kent police will face additional revenue costs of £3 million a year, and additional capital costs of more than £4 million a year. She says that that will have a damaging effect on future budgets for the Kent police, and on police manpower numbers.

What impact does the Minister expect the additional financial pressures on the Kent police exerted by the crimes described by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) to have on the future course of crime in the county, and on the police's ability to combat it?

Mr. Clarke: I have indeed seen the letter to which the right hon. and learned Gentleman refers. Given his experience, he will know that I have received similar letters from chairs of police authorities throughout the country and have discussed with delegations the

requirement for all police authorities at all times to secure future funding for their forces. I assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we shall continue to keep these matters under close review. The basis of that review will be the outcomes of the policing that is taking place in every force throughout the country—how well their policing has impacted on recorded levels of crimes. In that context, I am confident that Kent will continue to show an improvement, because of its outstanding police force and the outstanding leadership that that police force has.

CCTV

4. **Mr. Piara S. Khabra** (Ealing, Southall): How much the Government are investing in CCTV systems in the current financial year. [103964]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The Government are investing £153 million over three years in the closed circuit television initiative. I am pleased to announce today a further 181 awards to a value of £34 million under the first round of the initiative, bringing the total funding allocated during the current financial year to just under £40 million for 217 schemes. Details of the approved schemes are available on the Home Office website. A further 137 schemes, with a potential value of £25 million, require further information or reassurance before approval can be given.

Mr. Khabra: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. May I also thank him for his support for the borough of Ealing's application? Two bids have been approved to install more cameras in my constituency. How effective is CCTV in the reduction of crime under the Government's programme? In what categories of crime has such reduction taken place, and which areas have benefited most?

Mr. Clarke: I was delighted that the approvals that I mentioned earlier—including schemes from Southall town centre, Springbridge road and Acton town centre—bring investment in CCTV in my hon. Friend's constituency to a total value of £644,000. There is no doubt that CCTV reduces crime, especially in areas such as secure car parks, where individual reductions of up to 80 per cent. have been achieved, and on housing estates, where CCTV can make a material difference to security. There is no doubt that it has an impact; we are investing far more than ever before, and I am delighted that the programme is being established strongly throughout the country.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): I hope that your cold gets better, Madam Speaker.

I am pleased that the Minister is funding CCTV in Labour constituencies, but why has the application by Ampthill in Mid-Bedfordshire been turned down in the past? Will he be funding it this time round?

Mr. Clarke: I cannot immediately tell the hon. Gentleman why the application was turned down. However, two programmes were agreed today in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), so we cannot be accused of refusing the application on party-political grounds.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Thank you very much.

Mr. Clarke: I am glad to collect credits from wherever they come.

We have a detailed set of specifications on making CCTV work more effectively to ensure value for money. Where schemes have been turned down—in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, for example—the Home Office is committed to discussing with the local authorities and police ways of improving the scheme so that applications can be agreed in future. That applies to a number of schemes. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are prepared to look closely at the scheme to which he referred and see what can be done.

Community Support and Funding

5. **Mrs. Helen Brinton** (Peterborough): What support and funding are available to community groups for *(a)* fighting crime and *(b)* working to improve the quality of life in their areas. [103965]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The Government are committed to promoting and developing community involvement and self-help as part of their overall aim of improving the quality of life in all communities. In support of that, the Government allocate funds to umbrella bodies that provide expert advice, support and training to local community groups to help strengthen the community sector infrastructure and fight crime. A number of projects are already being run by the crime and disorder reduction partnerships, including the reducing burglary initiative, targeted policing and closed circuit television.

Mrs. Brinton: I welcome that reply, and my hon. Friend's clear commitment to making our communities safer. What does my hon. Friend have to say in praise of the Eastfield residents association? That part of my constituency was dubbed a war zone in the House two years ago, but the association has worked well to combat crime. In addition, how would he reply when the association says that local people can do only so much and that they would like some Government support?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend has told me about the work of that residents scheme, and I am happy to commend it. Active communities and tenants and residents associations make a massive difference in reducing crime in many communities. The thrust of our crime reduction partnerships under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 is to link with initiatives such as those taken in my hon. Friend's constituency and to bring resources to bear where they can make the greatest difference. In many crime reduction partnerships, community involvement makes a material difference in delivering results.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Will the Minister consider the work done in the city of Cambridge by the charity Wintercomfort? Will he

consider in particular the case of my constituent, John Brock, the director of the charity, who, just before Christmas, was sentenced to four years in prison for drugs-related offences, the details of which I shall not bore the House with? That has had serious consequences for many community programmes that try to help the homeless and people at the bottom of our society to overcome their problems, including drug abuse. Will the Minister see whether there is anything he can do?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman knows that I cannot comment on the specifics of the case to which he refers, as that is a matter for the courts. I am, however, prepared to consider his substantive point about the impact of the court case on the charity involved and the means required for support, and I will listen to representations from the hon. Gentleman or from people from his constituency on how the strength of charity and community work can be maintained at a time of significant disruption.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (Telford): I welcome all that my hon. Friend has said, but will he have a word with our mutual right hon. Friend, the Minister of State, Home Office, who, on a visit to Telford, saw the work of The Wrekin community safety partnership, which was set up in 1993 when there were not many such partnerships? The partnership has shown great strength in identifying local problems and solutions. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the best practice to be found among the partnerships is made widely available? We can all learn from each other.

Mr. Clarke: I take that point. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State is sitting next to me and tells me that the scheme in The Wrekin is excellent. My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Mr. Grocott) made the profound point that we must be much more effective in spreading knowledge of best practice in community schemes. We have set in motion a process that will make us far more effective in that area than we have been hitherto.

Regulatory Impact Assessment

6. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What discussions he has had with the Cabinet Office regarding the regulatory impact assessment for the Representation of the People Bill. [103966]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The regulatory impact assessment was available when the Bill was published on 18 November, and it expressed the Government's collective view.

Mr. Swayne: The impact assessment is a very thin document. How did the costs to business—estimated by the Confederation of British Industry at hundreds of millions of pounds—entirely escape those who made the assessment?

Mr. O'Brien: The regulatory impact assessment assesses impact on the economy. The CBI's estimate is more concerned with the impact on particular businesses. When businesses seek alternative sources of information, they may find that the whole economy will benefit. The Bill's provisions were agreed by Conservative representatives on the electoral procedures working party, and resulted from the data protection directive, to which the Conservative party signed up.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): If the seven batches of amendments that I tabled to the Representation of the People Bill had been accepted, there would have been cost compliance provisions and, presumably, some knock-on effect as regards the assessment. I do not know whether any assessment was made of how much I would have cost the nation—or the economy—if those measures had been developed. Is it not better to spend money—as the Bill does—on electoral registration so as to ensure that it is fully achieved, rather than on measures that would destroy it? That was what the Opposition did when they were in government and introduced the poll tax.

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend is right. I am sure that Conservative Members' constituents will be bewildered by the fact that some of them appear to oppose provisions in the Bill that would make it easier for people to vote. Why are they so frightened that people should be able to vote?

Police Pensions

7. **Mr. David Rendel** (Newbury): What amount and proportion of police funding was spent on pensions in *(a)* 1990 and *(b)* the most recent year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [103967]

12. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): What measures he is taking in respect of the funding of police pensions. [103972]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Net pensions expenditure in 1989–90 amounted to £285 million, or 6.9 per cent. of total spend. For 1998–99, expenditure was £889 million or 12.6 per cent. of total expenditure. We have increased the proportion of overall funding to be distributed for police pensions to 13.2 per cent. in 1998–99, and to 14.5 per cent. in 1999–2000, in recognition of increasing pension costs.

Following a major review of the police pensions system, I am currently considering what longer-term changes, if any, are required.

Mr. Rendel: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer; it shows that the proportion of money spent on police pensions has almost doubled during that period. Does he recall the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) just before Christmas, which said that, this year, four police forces are seeing a reduction in real-terms spending? However, if we take out pensions spending, 14 police forces will see a reduction in real-terms spending. What does the right hon. Gentleman intend to do about that? How will he get more policemen back on the beat?

Mr. Straw: The answer to the last part of the hon. Gentleman's question is that, as he knows, we have found additional new money—£35 million—for the next financial year, and more thereafter, to pay for the 5,000

police recruits over and above the number that will otherwise be recruited. The arrangements whereby the police pension costs form part of each police authority's budget are of long standing; they have some merits in ensuring that police forces concern themselves with, for example, the number of unnecessary medical retirements that they permit. However, I accept that those rising costs throughout the country are of great concern to the police service—as they are to me. That is why we are examining the longer-term future of the pension scheme.

Mrs. Lait: May I begin by thanking Ministers, on behalf of the people of Penge, for the closed circuit television system? However, although it might reduce the amount of crime on the streets of Penge, I suspect that the residents will feel equally concerned about police numbers, and will be even more concerned when they realise what a large proportion of the Metropolitan police budget goes on pensions. I have listened with great care to the exchange between the Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel). Will the Home Secretary reassure me further that, when that fact is taken with the expenditure on radios to which reference has already been made, the people of Penge, and of Beckenham and the whole of London, will not see a reduction in front-line policing over time because of the costs of radio and pensions?

Mr. Straw: It is my fervent hope that the circumstances that the hon. Lady desires come about. I also point out to her that, during the whole period between 1992 and March 1998, when the budgets had been set by the Conservative Administration whom she supported, the Metropolitan police lost 2,060 officers. I worked hard to try to stabilise the number of Metropolitan police officers, and, in the year that ended in March 1999, the reduction was not 2,000, but just 21.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Is it not an impossible situation when the proportion of police funding for pensions continues to increase? Although I welcome the fact that the Home Secretary has admitted that he will undertake a fundamental review of the matter, I urge him to adopt, at the earliest practical date, a fully funded pension scheme for the police service, and to introduce it gradually so that it will not disadvantage serving officers or reduce their pension expectations, but will, in the longer term, provide security for them and their families.

Mr. Straw: I have already said that, obviously, the changes to the police pension scheme will not disadvantage existing serving officers. We are closely examining the idea of a fully funded scheme, which in principle would be a more satisfactory alternative. The problem that we are up against, to which we have found no solution, although we hope that one may be forthcoming, is that the initial costs—the funding costs—of a fully funded scheme are very substantial and that money would have to be found from somewhere.

The Tote

8. **Mr. John Grogan** (Selby): If he will make a statement about the future of the Tote. [103968]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): We announced last May that the Tote was to be sold. Since then we have been considering, with the help of independent advisers, how and on what terms the sale should proceed, and we intend to announce our conclusions shortly.

Mr. Grogan: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that our 59 race courses are a great national asset and that, as an alternative to selling the Tote to the highest bidder, there are great merits in the proposals being jointly advanced by the Tote and the racing industry to set up a racing trust to buy and run the Tote, so maintaining the vital source of income to racing from the Tote and ensuring that in future it is run on a wholly commercial basis for the benefit of the sport as a whole?

Mr. O'Brien: I certainly agree that our racing industry is a national asset. We are considering the merits of several proposals. The sale options under consideration include a sale to a racing trust, a sale to racing in another way, a sale on the open market and a flotation on the stock exchange. We intend to sell the Tote as a single business, in line with the May announcement.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): That answer was not satisfactory. The Tote was set up by the racing industry. It does not belong to the state. It has never taken a state subsidy, and it should be returned to the racing industry. Does the Minister agree?

Mr. O'Brien: The Tote will go to the proper and appropriate purchasers or people who provide the state with some funding in return for it. It is right that the interests of racing, of those who work for the Tote and of the taxpayer should all be considered when taking a final decision. We shall announce that decision very shortly.

Closed Circuit Television

9. **Mr. Clive Efford** (Eltham): What assessment he has made of the contribution of CCTV to the prevention and detection of crimes; and if he will make a statement. [103969]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Police operational experience and a number of research studies reveal that CCTV has considerable crime reduction and detection success, particularly when used as part of a wider strategy.

Schemes funded under the current CCTV initiative will be evaluated to build up a knowledge base of what works best and in what context.

Mr. Efford: I thank my hon. Friend for that an answer. May I pass on the thanks of Greenwich council and Eltham police for the scheme that is being funded by the CCTV initiative? May I ask him to join me in congratulating Eltham police, who, by using a temporary scheme over Christmas, managed to arrest 10 individuals with the help of evidence that was gathered by camera, in a period when they would usually expect to arrest four or five individuals? Does he agree that this is vital step forward for the police, in that it will enable them to deploy resources more efficiently?

However, there is some concern about the ownership of the evidence that is gathered. Does my hon. Friend agree that, to secure public confidence in the long term, there needs to be a degree of openness and accountability about the evidence that is gathered by camera?

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful for that information and I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the police in Eltham on the success of their initiative over Christmas. There are many examples of areas where such initiatives have worked very well, but I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that the evidential basis of some of the material that is collected needs—and is being given—very careful examination and assessment.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Is the Minister aware of a recent local crime prevention survey carried out in mid-Suffolk that shows that 90 per cent. of local residents in Stowmarket believe that the introduction of a CCTV scheme in that town centre would enhance local safety? Is he further aware that Mid Suffolk district council in my constituency is considering making a bid this year for the second round of challenge funding? In light of that, can the Minister assure me today that, on receipt of a bid, he will bear in mind the fact that Stowmarket is the only market town of its size in Suffolk without a CCTV scheme, and seriously consider giving Stowmarket the share of funding that it deserves under the challenge funding scheme?

Mr. Clarke: I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. However, it might have been more in character with his usual graciousness had he acknowledged that the scheme in Bury St. Edmunds that we have announced today has been given to his constituency and is a step forward. It might also have been gracious for a former special adviser to a Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer to acknowledge that in this one year the Government have given more to CCTV schemes than was given in the whole of the last five years of the Conservative Government.

I give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that we shall consider carefully the bid for Stowmarket, a place which I travel through frequently on the train from Norwich to London. As I flash past, I shall try to glean what I can to assess the town's crime needs.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the Government's contribution to the introduction of CCTV throughout the community. However, may I press him for more portable CCTVs in communities? My own constituency is asking for such facilities, which would do a tremendous amount to reduce crime in Outwood and Stanley. Will my hon. Friend tell us what provision for portable CCTV is made in the allocation to which he has referred?

Mr. Clarke: I very much agree with my hon. Friend's points—indeed, a number of the schemes agreed and announced today are portable CCTV schemes. We are currently drawing up the guidelines for the next round in which I hope we shall announce results more regularly—every three months or whatever—than on a year-by-year basis. In the guidelines, we intend to give priority not only to portable CCTV schemes such as those that have been mentioned, but to schemes that focus on rural areas and on parades in out-of-town estates, which have not always been at the top of priority lists. I hope that previous experience will inform the future programme, which remains very substantial over the next two or three years.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): Given the undoubted effectiveness of closed circuit television in preventing and reducing crime in this country, why do police force figures show that, in the first six months of the current financial year, recorded crime rose nationally by no less than 5 per cent? Why is that happening?

Mr. Clarke: As I said earlier, the hon. Gentleman will have to wait for the figures tomorrow to see exactly what is happening on recorded crime throughout the country. However, there is no doubt that CCTV can have a major impact in reducing crime in the ways that I described to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra). It might be in keeping to acknowledge that the Government are trying to use this important weapon to reduce crime in a way that most Members on both sides of the House would acknowledge is beneficial.

Wheel Clamping

10. **Ms Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster, Central): What steps he is taking to regulate the activities of private wheel-clamping companies. [103970]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): We have issued a White Paper on the private security industry and propose in it to establish a private security industry authority. This would require wheel clampers to be licensed, and establish a mechanism whereby wheel-clamping firms could be subject to statutory regulations or codes of practice. We are currently considering the responses to the White Paper and will then proceed accordingly.

Ms Winterton: As I am sure my right hon. Friend will be aware, his answer will delight thousands of motorists who have been the victims of the notorious clamp-and-deliver tactics of unscrupulous cowboy companies. Will he assure me, however, that he will consult not only the wheel-clamping industry, but motoring organisations, the police and local authorities to ensure that any regulation is strong enough to make sure that motorists are no longer subject to the tactics adopted by the modern highway robbers posing as parking enforcers?

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend has been a redoubtable campaigner against the highway robbers and cowboys in the industry. I can certainly give her the assurance that she seeks.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I acknowledge that no one in their right mind would attempt to clamp the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), who has been an indefatigable campaigner on this subject. However, will the Minister confirm that, as part of the proposals that the Government intend to introduce, they will speed up the review announced in November by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and

the Regions of the procedure whereby the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is able to release the personal details of motorists?

Mr. Boateng: We are working closely with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on all these issues. The hon. Gentleman can be assured that that co-operation will continue.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): May I tell my right hon. Friend that cowboy clampers are still demanding money with menaces in many parts of central Birmingham? In some instances, they are trying to seize jewellery and other valuables from those who are caught in dark areas where people park. I urge my right hon. Friend to make the best possible speed in introducing regulations to encourage the proper firms that exercise their responsibilities sensitively, and to clamp down on and put out of business those who act in a hard way and frighten the living daylights out of people.

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend speaks with considerable authority and knowledge on this subject. We are considering a range of options, including criminal sanctions.

Fire Safety

14. **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East): What plans he has to co-ordinate responsibility for the improvement of fire safety. [103974]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Government continue to give priority to community fire safety, and there have been recent welcome reductions both in the number of fires and in deaths from fire. We expect shortly to set up a new fire safety advisory board to help maintain the impetus for improvements in fire safety.

Mr. Crausby: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I am sure that he is aware that there are some 60 complex pieces of legislation governing fire safety. Does he agree that a single fire safety Bill would help further the reductions in fires and deaths from fires and, most important, would further assist fire authorities in shifting the emphasis from cure to prevention?

Mr. O'Brien: I agree with that. We remain committed to introducing a fire safety Bill as soon as parliamentary time allows. One of the aims of that Bill will be to rationalise fire safety legislation, replacing fire safety provisions in various Acts and introducing a general duty of care, to be enforced as far as possible by fire authorities.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my hon. Friend monitor closely some of the aspects of fire reports that are of continuing interest for passengers? Will he, for example, continue to discuss with Eurotunnel the conditions that exist for the safe carriage of passengers, given that there are continuing worries about suggestions that official fire forces might be replaced by people who are employed directly by the authority?

Mr. O'Brien: I will certainly ensure that the Home Office keeps fully informed of the situation regarding the channel tunnel. We want to ensure that all passengers can travel in that tunnel and that all freight can be carried in it in as safe an environment as possible.

Witness Protection

15. **Dr. Desmond Turner** (Brighton, Kemptown): What measures he is taking to ensure that witnesses in magistrates courts are adequately protected. [103975]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The victim support scheme will be extending its activities to the magistrates courts. That will be of considerable assistance to witnesses who are victims appearing in magistrates courts. To enable the scheme to do this, we have increased incrementally by 50 per cent. to £19 million the grant made available to it, so that it can establish witness support services in all such courts by April 2002.

Dr. Turner: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. As I am sure he is aware, there is a very real and considerable problem of intimidation, not only of those who are victims as well as witnesses, but of witnesses, and not just in magistrates courts but in Crown courts. There are many and constant examples in my constituency. In a serious murder trial, for example, witnesses were literally in fear for their lives. The police do not have the resources to protect every witness, so in areas of my constituency there is a climate of fear: people dare not give evidence or give written statements for fear of reprisals. Will my right hon. Friend please undertake to review witness support and, in particular, protection?

Mr. Boateng: The police rightly give considerable priority to witness support and protection. We support them in that with the resources necessary to that end. More than that, it was this Government, as my hon. Friend knows, who introduced the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 precisely in order to address the problem that he has identified, which manifests itself in magistrates courts, including in cases of domestic violence and neighbour disputes. It is very important to ensure, as we have, that magistrates courts have a battery of protection that they can extend to witnesses. Without such support, we shall be unable effectively to reduce crime in the way that we are determined to do.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): The right hon. Gentleman clearly and rightly takes this matter very seriously. Does he agree that witness intimidation hinders the good order and administration of honourable justice not only in murder cases, to which the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Dr. Turner) drew the House's attention, but in lesser cases? Does the Minister also agree that the only way in which we can prevent that is by ensuring more people on the ground, better planning and

layout of magistrates courts and the provision of areas where people can be protected while waiting to give evidence?

Mr. Boateng: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. The security of magistrates courts, in relation to the protection of both victims and witnesses, can be enhanced enormously by proper layout and design—indeed, the number of escapes can be reduced by effective layout and design in cell and dock areas. We are liaising very closely with the Lord Chancellor's Department on existing and new build in order to ensure that we take such matters into account, to protect witnesses and victims and reduce the number of escapes in transit.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): As the chair of the all-party voice group, I know how welcome the new witness protection measures are to people with learning disabilities who have been victims of abuse. One issue about which they are particularly concerned is training of the judges and magistrates who decide on cases involving victims who have learning disabilities. Can the Minister tell us of any progress on judicial training?

Mr. Boateng: I can certainly assure my hon. Friend that we take judicial training very seriously. We work closely with the Judicial Studies Board, which, as she will appreciate, is an independent body. I assure her that the board, the Home Office and—important in this context—the Department of Health are well aware of the importance of ensuring that special needs are taken into account. That applies to learning disabilities. We have found that those who work for some of the charities engaged in work involving learning disabilities are very often the best people to provide such training. We are actively exploring that avenue in order to ensure that the judiciary gets the benefit of hearing from those who have to work at first hand with such problems.

No one should be denied justice simply because they are living with a disability. That applies particularly to learning disability. All too often, people are led simply to dismiss the evidence of those who are grappling with disabilities—and doing so with great heroism and courage. Such people deserve, and will get, the full protection of the law.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Does the Minister appreciate that the problem of petty intimidation of witnesses applies equally in rural areas such as the one I represent? I have seen several cases recently in small villages of people being afraid to come forward with the evidence that the police need. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that fear is exacerbated by the lack of visible police presence, reduction in patrols and the inability successfully to mount prosecutions? Will he assure me that every effort will be made to give communities the support that they need to provide the evidence that the police require to put criminals away?

Mr. Boateng: Both rural and urban areas suffer from this problem. My fellow Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) and I work closely on issues of sparsity and criminal justice. The hon. Gentleman's point will certainly be borne in mind.

Crime Figures (Lancashire)

16. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): If he will make a statement on the latest crime figures for Lancashire. [103976]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): The latest figures, covering the 12 months to September 1999, will be published tomorrow. However, I can tell the House that, for the period to March 1999, there was a 10 per cent. reduction in recorded crime in Lancashire.

Mr. Pike: I thank my right hon. Friend, who is a neighbour of mine, for that answer. Is not such news good for Lancashire, and does it not show that the Government's policies are working: the police, local authorities and communities are working to ensure that the mindless minority are not allowed to destroy the lives of the law-abiding majority?

Mr. Straw: The record of Lancashire police is exemplary. It shows the good sense of the Government's policies in providing full backing to the police and local authorities. I am delighted to note that in a financial settlement that was below the average for the current financial year, Burnley and Padiham are to get 14 more front-line police officers in the next financial year.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The chief constable of Lancashire is to be congratulated on the use of her resources to achieve such an excellent reduction in crime. Does the Home Secretary agree that the fact that the chief constable has now had to make application to the crime-fighting fund for more police officers is a clear indication that her existing police budget is not the source of additional manpower for her fight against crime?

Mr. Straw: I am delighted that the chief constable of Lancashire is making application to the crime-fighting fund for additional officers. I am also pleased to place on record what Chief Constable Pauline Clare said when the settlement for next year was announced on 26 October:

"An increase of 4 per cent. is more than we expected and should be sufficient to match anticipated increases in pay and inflation. It should also help us to maintain police officer numbers."

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you had any indication that the Government intend to make a statement on the lifting of the European Union arms embargo on Indonesia? That is a contentious issue in the House. The Indonesians owe us £1.5 billion in export credit guarantees. Theirs is still an unstable regime. The United States, by contrast, is refusing to lift the embargo until the Indonesians co-operate with the war crimes investigations, and until the refugees return from West Timor to East Timor. It is important that the Government explain why they have supported the lifting of the embargo, whereas some other EU countries have opposed it.

Madam Speaker: I have to tell the hon. Lady that I have not been informed by a Minister that the Government are to make a statement on that issue. Those on the Treasury Bench—perhaps I should say the Government Front Bench, because some of the media do not know what I mean by Treasury Bench—will have noted the hon. Lady's concern, and we may hear something in due course.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Has the Secretary of State for Defence asked to make a statement setting the record right as regards his statement last week on the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights on homosexuals in the armed forces? He stated:

"British Governments have always complied with such rulings".—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 287.]

As recently as 1988, a British Government derogated unilaterally from a ruling under the European convention on human rights relating to the interrogation of prisoners.

It may be the Secretary of State's intention to come to the House to make it clear that the handling of such issues by earlier Governments is not the problem: it is the fact that the Government decided last year to incorporate the convention into British law—

Madam Speaker: Order. I fear that the hon. Gentleman is seeking to prolong an exchange that we had last week. That is not a point of order, and he will have to pursue his interest by other means.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Have you received any requests for a further statement from the Home Secretary on the condition of General Pinochet? Last Wednesday, the Home Secretary made a statement to the House in which he outlined his view that Senator Pinochet was not fit to stand trial. There seemed to be some discrepancies in that statement, according to a report in *The Observer* yesterday; and today the Home Secretary has placed in the Library a letter from Professor Grimley Evans.

I have an early-day motion asking for the release of the medical information, and there is a request from the Spanish authorities for an independent medical examination of Pinochet. This man is accused of serious crimes against humanity under the terrorism convention, and I believe that it would be right and proper for the Home Secretary to return to the House to make a further statement, so that these discrepancies can be explored.

Madam Speaker: I have not heard that the Home Secretary is to make a statement on that issue today, but if I recall correctly, the last time the Home Secretary was at the Dispatch Box on that issue he said that he hoped to make a statement to the House as soon as possible.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Last week, you issued guidance to Ministers, in particular, suggesting that answers should be shorter so that we could get through more questions. In giving his first answer today in Home Office questions, the Minister of State took 11 minutes to say precisely nothing, as he seemed incapable of replying to the question put to him by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). May I ask you, Madam Speaker, in the interests of education and training for Ministers, to provide details and data relating to particularly long questions, and guidance so that Ministers' performances may be improved?

Madam Speaker: I must say that I noted that that first question took quite some time. I should like to run seminars on how to answer questions, but also, sometimes, on how to ask them. I hope that the House will note both that those on the Government Front Bench should answer questions far more briskly, and that Back Benchers should take it on themselves to sit in the Tea Room at lunchtime and go through their questions so that they are precise and do not ramble on. Many are Adjournment debates rather than questions.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is always very brisk with his questions.

Mr. Dalyell: Perhaps I could make the first contribution to your seminar, Madam Speaker, by asking whether you have received a request that Question 36 should be answered. It dealt with the issue of WPC Yvonne Fletcher, and asked whether there had been any progress since our ambassador went to Tripoli.

Madam Speaker: The Home Secretary did not indicate to me today that he had selected that question to answer. As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is done from time to time at the end of Question time. I am afraid that he must bide his time, and perhaps table the question again in another form. He is very ingenious, and no doubt capable of doing that.

Opposition Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Pensioners

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.37 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I beg to move,

That this House believes that an increase of 75p in April 2000 in the rate of the retirement pension would be inadequate.

Only in the House of Commons would this motion be controversial. The idea that paying retirement pensioners an extra 75p from next April could possibly be adequate would not occur to most of the pensioners in our constituencies, or, indeed, to non-pensioners. Here, it will divide the House, and, I suspect, may even be defeated. We live in hope.

Pensioners to whom I have talked—and, I am sure, those to whom many other hon. Members have talked—are insulted by the offer of 75p next April. They are not only insulted, however; they are resigned, which I find all the more worrying. They are resigned because they have reached a point at which they expect nothing better. Sadly, successive Governments have left pensioners feeling that they cannot trust any of the whole lot of them, and that this is no more than they could have expected.

It is not only the Liberal Democrats and some nationalists who believe that 75p is inadequate. I established on Thursday evening that 83 Labour Members had signed an early-day motion whose wording is identical to this motion. If we exclude the payroll vote, that means that approximately one in four Labour Back Benchers considers 75p inadequate, as well as the many more who think the same, but did not add their names. The Minister may wish to dismiss us as an Opposition party, but I wonder whether he wishes to dismiss the views of about a quarter, or perhaps more, of his own Back Benchers.

Those 83 hon. Members include former Ministers—and, indeed, one person who served in the Cabinet in this Parliament. We are talking not just about the awkward squad, but about some very senior as well as some newer Members. If the 83 were to vote for the motion along with the Liberal Democrats and the nationalists, the Government's majority would be decimated, provided that one other party voted with us.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): Not "decimated".

Mr. Webb: Yes, literally decimated. The Government's majority would be reduced from about 170 to about 17.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): The definition of "decimation" is reducing by a tenth, not to a tenth.

Mr. Robathan: Exactly, Professor.

Mr. Webb: I am prepared to argue that it means reducing to a tenth, but I will not press the point.

The crucial question is, how will Her Majesty's official Opposition vote? We wait with bated breath to find out. Given that, had they been in power, 75p is all that pensioners would have got, one would expect them to vote against the motion. So on the ground that the Conservative party does not actually have a pensions policy, it should abstain. However, on the ground that the opportunist thing to do would be to rip up what it used to do and to say the opposite, it should vote with us; so there are all those possibilities. This afternoon, we look forward to finding out what the Tories will do.

The motion is about far more than the uprating. It is about whether the basic state pension has a future at all. The critical point is this: in a year when the Government had spare cash not just for everything else, but for pensioners and, indeed, for pensioner incomes, they thought of every way to spend it except putting it on the state pension. If they will not put it on the state pension in a year when they have plenty of money, will they ever if times are hard? If we do not stop the rot now, there will be no pension left to save.

To give an idea of how extraordinary the position in which we find ourselves is, I consulted the Library about what has happened to the state pension not just in the past 20 years, but since the war, relative to average earnings and relative to the poverty line. The results were astonishing and cast new light on what has been happening in the welfare state since the war.

When the pension came in, it represented about 14 per cent. of average earnings. That rose to 19 per cent. in the mid-1960s and stayed at around 20 per cent. until the early 1980s, when Mrs. Thatcher got her hands on it. Now it is about 15 per cent. In 30 years or so, it will be just 7 per cent. Why does that matter? It matters because pensions are about smoothing the transition from paid employment to retirement. If pensions lose touch with the earnings that they replace, they will achieve nothing.

I give one example. I have said that pensions were about 15 per cent. of average earnings. Hon. Members earn a minimum of £47,000 a year. Fifteen per cent. of that is roughly £7,000. Could any of us imagine retiring on £7,000? Clearly not. Of course, the pension in absolute terms is not £7,000: it is £3,500.

That is what we are increasingly condemning our fellow citizens to. It will get worse, not better because, by the time the Government state second pension comes in, the basic state pension will be half of income at the poverty line, or, in today's money, about £39 a week. The Government like to describe the state pension as the foundation of income in old age, but it is clearly a sinking foundation.

Not so long ago, the Labour party used to think that pensions should have something to do with earnings. This morning, I was leafing through *Hansard* from 13 April 1983. I came across the Labour spokesman's views. Succinctly and powerfully, he said:

"Although pensions being tied to prices might look good for electioneering slogans, it is catastrophic for people who are now aged between 30 and 50 who believe that they are paying into a scheme that will provide them with a decent pension. That will produce major problems in the future."—[*Official Report*, 13 April 1983; Vol. 40, c. 882.]

What would happen under a Blairite regime to a firebrand left-winger such as that? Surely he would not find a place in the Government; he certainly would not as pensions

[Mr. Webb]

Minister. It is a funny old world, as I am sure the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker) would agree.

Today, we are considering not just the value of the pension relative to earnings. Often, the Government will say that the pension is unaffordable. In last Tuesday's debate, they came up with some huge figure—tens of billions of pounds—on linking the pension to earnings and said that that was clearly unaffordable, but the answers that I have from the Library show that, in the 30 to 40 years after the war, successive Labour and Tory Governments not only linked the pension to earnings, but did vastly better. The pension rose from 13 per cent. of average earnings just after the war to 20 per cent. in the early 1980s—hugely better than earnings indexation.

Those 30 to 40 years were not years of unparalleled boom, yet successive Governments found the money to do that. How can it be that a prosperous country such as ours cannot find the money to do it now, when successive post-war Governments did? Could it be to do with political priorities and the fact that, incredibly, the basic pension is still not a priority?

We must consider a second aspect of the pension's value—its value relative to the poverty line. Although the Minister is very fond of saying that the pension was never intended to be enough to live on, when it was introduced—when it was worth 108 per cent. of the national assistance line—it was exactly that. If one had only a pension, one was not entitled to a top-up, because the pension was supposed to be enough to live on.

For most of the post-war period, the pension has been worth about 95 per cent. of the poverty line, or just a shade below. In the past year or two, however, there has been a drastic fall in its value. For someone who is newly retired, the pension is now worth 86 per cent. of the poverty line; amazingly, for an 80-year-old, it is 79 per cent. of the poverty line—which is a full £18 per week short of the poverty line. The consequence has been a huge and growing gap between the pension and the poverty line.

How is the gap to be filled? According to Ministers, for most people, it is to be filled by voluntary savings.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I have been listening very closely to the hon. Gentleman's comments. However, I should tell him that—I say this in the Chamber, as it is a contempt of the House to mislead it—last year, from my 69,000 constituents, we received only six letters complaining about the level of the state pension. With the introduction of the pension guarantee, much of the argument on raising the state pension has effectively been destroyed. The hon. Gentleman has now been speaking for seven minutes, but has not even mentioned that.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman may be sure that I shall mention it. Furthermore, I think that he has received so few letters on the issue because people do not think that there is any point in sending one. As I said, pensioners do not trust any of us on the issue because they have been let down by so many of us.

The gap between the basic pension and the poverty line has to be filled. However, if it is to be filled by people's voluntary savings, and if they will receive only a means-tested top-up—which the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) just mentioned—why should they bother to save?

Currently, someone retiring with £40,000 in savings should not have bothered to save that money, as it will buy him or her a pension top-up and payment of rent. The way things are going, if we retire with £100,000, we need not have bothered; expressed as a lump sum, it is only the gap between the basic pension and the poverty line. Why should anyone save in such circumstances?

The phrase in the Government's amendment to the motion that we should support

"the Government's commitment to letting pensioners benefit more from their savings"

is ludicrous. The Government are discouraging savings with every step that they take.

Why is this year's pension rise so low—only 1.1 per cent? In the year to September, the inflation rate was precisely 1.1 per cent.—whence the pension increase of 75p was derived. The increase will give pensioners another £39 a year, to meet all the price rises facing them. However, let us consider their various bills.

Last April, I tabled a question on council tax increases, and was told that, net of all rebates and benefits, the typical pensioner had to pay an extra £40 in council tax. As the same funding formula will be used this April, the increase could well be similar. Paying that one increase will thus require all a pensioner's pension increase, leaving him or her nothing to pay for other price increases. As the motion states, the 1.1 per cent. increase is inadequate because it does not reflect the rise in pensioners' cost of living. However, the situation is even worse.

Inflation was low because mortgage rates and interest rates were decreasing. The consequence of those decreases has not only been a poor pension increase, but decreasing savings incomes for pensioners. Pensioners were therefore hit with the double whammy of decreasing incomes, caused by decreasing interest rates, and a poor pensions uprating.

It is one thing to say that 75p is not enough, but another to suggest what should be done. There are two aspects to our proposals. First, as pensioners are buying a different basket of goods, indexation should relate to pensioners' true cost of living and not to the average cost of living of the population overall. The Government should therefore construct a proper pensioners' price index. Although there is already a pensioners' price index, incredibly, it does not include housing. It therefore does not provide a proper basis for indexing pensions.

I hope that the Minister will tell us that the Government will determine pensioners' true living costs and index pensions on that basis.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I support the hon. Gentleman wholeheartedly on the need for a relevant index. Does he accept that that would not in itself make up for the loss that pensioners have suffered since 1980-81, when the change was made? Does he also accept that we need to bridge that loss for pensioners as far as we can and as quickly as possible?

Mr. Webb: The right hon. Gentleman is right. I was going to describe the second part of the package.

The oldest pensioners have lost most from 20 years of price indexing the basic state pension. Those who retired when the link was broken have had nothing but price indexation for 20 years. Inflation has eroded their savings. Many of them are elderly widows on low incomes. That is why our party wants substantial additional resources to be focused on the oldest pensioners—the over-75s and over-80s. We want a targeted approach that does not rely on means testing, but which would help to deal with the problem that the right hon. Gentleman raised.

The hon. Member for Workington referred to how the Government's other policies have helped pensioners. Those policies are listed at considerable length in the amendment. Let us take a look at some of them. The amendment stretches the truth considerably on the tax guarantee, saying that it

"now means that two thirds of pensioners now pay no income tax".

The use of the word "now" twice is proof that nothing has happened. One would expect the number of pensioners paying income tax next year to be only a fraction of the number the year the Government came to office, but the facts show that the figure is the same. So much for a tax guarantee. The Government can guarantee only that as many pensioners will be paying tax as ever.

What about the winter fuel money? It might as well be called the winter biscuit money or the winter tea money, because it has nothing to do with fuel. Clearly it is welcome, but why was it not put on the pension and related benefits? When the Government had £500 million—or whatever the figure was—for pensioners, why did it go on winter fuel money? Winter fuel money does not have to be indexed, so next year it can be £100, the same as this year. Who knows whether a future Government will carry on with it? Have we voted for a winter fuel payments Act? Of course we have not. The change did not need primary legislation because it is a social fund payment. I wonder whether hon. Members who are older than 60 realise that they are the beneficiaries of social fund payments. That is how easy the measure was to introduce and that is how easy it will be to do away with. Had the money been put on the pension, it would at least have had to be indexed. Although it might have been phased out slowly, it would have been better on the pension.

The Government sometimes say that our proposal for age additions is poorly targeted, but what else is paying £100 tax free to everyone in the country older than 60? It is scarcely a targeted strategy. The Government are guilty of inconsistency.

At least the Government have listened to us about the additional needs of older pensioners when it comes to television licences. Their policy is welcome to that extent, although there seems to be no explanation of why pensioners are not being given the money to spend for themselves.

The minimum income guarantee is a good benchmark, but to coin a new Labour phrase, it should be for the few, not the many. It should be a residual measure, catching the few who fall through the safety net. It should not be a mass approach for hundreds of thousands of pensioners. The Government tell us that in 2047 all will be well, but we have slightly more urgent priorities. Critically, one third of those entitled to the so-called guarantee do not get it. Money on the pension would reach them, but the so-called guarantee is not guaranteed.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On the subject of effective targeting, does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be very wise, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition recommended, to abolish the 65-year age restriction for claimants of invalid care allowance and the carers premium, thereby helping 55,000 of the poorest pensioners in the country?

Mr. Webb: I have a lot of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's point, which is why I am curious as to why the Leader of the Opposition did not do that when he was a social security Minister.

The objection to such increases in the pension is usually that they would not benefit the poorest pensioners. It is sometimes said that if extra money is put on the pension it will just come off their income support, but that ignores three important, deserving and needy groups of pensioners, all of whom would benefit from a pension rise.

The first group are the 750,000 pensioners—as estimated by the Government—who are entitled to income support but do not claim it, typically missing out on £1,000 a year. They would benefit in full from a pension rise, and they are the poorest pensioners in the land, bar none. In addition, there are 600,000 pensioners who live below the income support line but who have capital above the measly £8,000 threshold. I should point out that £8,000 is not very much life savings. Most of us would be concerned if we started our retirement with only £8,000 accumulated. However, that is enough to deny someone the so-called guarantee. Those people would get a pension rise in full.

The third and final group—the group who write to me most, from all around the country—are those who have small amounts of savings, taking them beyond the reach of the means-tested benefits system. They get nothing from the so-called guarantee; they get pension rises in full. If the Government really believe, as they say in the amendment, in

"letting pensioners benefit more from their savings"

they will reward those people who have saved, and not penalise them.

How would our proposals—pensioner price indexation and extra money for the older pensioners—be paid for? Has anyone looked at the value of the national insurance fund recently? The balance is getting on for £15 billion, and the annual surplus is in excess of £1 billion. The package that I have just proposed would cost about half that. These are modest demands, yet the vast amounts in the national insurance fund suggest that the money is there. It is about priorities. The specific figures that we have identified are a £5 increase for those over 80 and a £3 increase for those over 75—as a down payment, with more to come.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I have sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's view that we need to be doing more for pensioners. However, did I correctly understand him to say that there is a £15 billion surplus, half of which would be taken to fund his party's proposals? Could he clarify that?

Mr. Webb: I apologise if that was unclear. The balance is £15 billion, and there is an surplus of more than

[Mr. Webb]

£1 billion every year. The package would cost half the annual surplus—about £0.5 billion. In other words, the balance in the account would continue to go up even our proposals were implemented.

I have outlined what I believe should be done. It is not enough for Opposition parties—as some are wont to do—to say how terrible things are without putting forward a credible alternative. [HON. MEMBERS: "Like the Liberal Democrats."] We have proposed what we would do today.

The motion is simply about this April's pension rise. As regards the basic state pension, the Government have said that they will carry on with what the Tories did. Pensioners will get 75p this April unless the House can convince the Government that that is unacceptable.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I was one of those who willingly signed the relevant early-day motion, and I will continue to do so in future. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware that I am not the only Labour Member to sign it. While one is pleased and proud with what the Government have done up to now, many of us had hoped that the Government would be doing even more by the time of the general election. That is why we signed the motion.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's support, and we share his hope that the Government will do more before the election. We would like them to do something this April, rather than let pensioners have another year of inadequate incomes.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): My hon. Friend has expressed the views of the parties, and he answered the question from the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). What is the view of the pensioners' movement and pensioners' organisations? In my experience, this is one of the two main pensioners' issues that all the pensioner groups make the most representations about. They are livid that the Government do not understand how measly their proposal for this year is.

Mr. Webb: My hon. Friend is right. Not long ago, I addressed the national pensioners' convention in Blackpool—an audience of 1,500 pensioners. They are calling for earnings indexation and a substantial increase in the pension for older pensioners, in line with our arguments. We are finding that our arguments are gaining resonance, and pensioners are concerned that people are out of touch.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I have a great deal of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman has said. In his assessment of pensioners' living standards, has he made any calculation of the increasing costs imposed on the elderly in day centre and home help charges and all the other charges made by local authorities of all parties throughout the country? Obviously, those charges affect the living standards of a specific group of people who used to have to rely on an inadequate pension and now have to rely on an inadequate pension minus the charges.

Mr. Webb: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is exactly the sort of item that should appear in the index of goods that we take into account when we consider what should happen to pensions, even though it has no impact on the retail prices index.

In a year in which the Government had money for pensioners, they put nothing into the pension. A sentence of death is hanging over the state pension. By our votes this evening, we have a chance to bring it a reprieve.

4 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"notes that the Government inherited a situation where increasing numbers of pensioners were living in poverty and where, if nothing had been done, one in three people would have retired on to means-tested benefits by the middle of this century; congratulates the Government on the start it has made in dealing with these problems; applauds in particular the introduction of the Minimum Income Guarantee, benefiting one and a half million pensioner households, and welcomes the Government's commitment to raising it in line with earnings for the rest of this Parliament and to conducting a take-up campaign to ensure that pensioners get what they are entitled to; supports the Government's commitment to helping pensioners, including the restoration of free eye tests and the new winter fuel payments, which benefit over seven million pensioner households and will be paid every year from now on; welcomes the Government's commitment to extending further help with pensioners' needs, including free television licences for people aged 75 or over from next autumn and the extension of concessionary public transport fare schemes; supports the Government's commitment to letting pensioners benefit more from their savings through the minimum tax guarantee which now means that two thirds of pensioners now pay no income tax; and welcomes the Government's plans to reform pensions, through the new stakeholder pensions and second state pension, so that everyone who puts in a full life of working or caring will in due course be able to retire on an income above means-tested levels.".

I welcome this debate—one of the key debates for the Liberal Democrats. The subject, which they have chosen, is important to the Liberal Democrats here and to the Government, but it clearly not important to 72 per cent. of Liberal Democrat Members, as they have not bothered us with their attendance: a factor that they can explain in due course to their constituents.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Cheap.

Mr. Rooker: Oh, yes. We will have some cheapness today.

I regret the fact that I shall have to use some figures and statistics today; I shall try to keep them to a minimum but, in rebutting some of the points made by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) it is inevitable that I shall have to use some. As the hon. Gentleman said, the motion deals only with the supposed inadequacy of the 75p increase. The rest of what he said is not in the motion. It is on the record, but that is not the same as presenting a motion to the House that can be debated.

The hon. Gentleman did not tell us what is quite clear: that the Liberal Democrats have changed their policy since the general election. We make no apology for fulfilling our manifesto commitment—and indeed going beyond it. It is well known that the commitment on which we were elected was to use the basic state pension as the building blocks of pensioner income and to raise it at least in line with prices. That has been done for three years.

On page 49, the Liberal Democrat manifesto—I am not taking this out of context; I shall quote the whole sentence—said:

"The basic state pension will remain indexed to prices."

That is exactly what the 75p is. The manifesto also said:

"We will create an additional top-up pension for pensioners with incomes below the income support level. This will be indexed to earnings".

That is exactly what the minimum income guarantee is. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said on more than one occasion, it will continue to be index-linked to earnings.

The Government have put into effect two key planks of the Liberal Democrat manifesto, and we are being held to account and complained against today with regard to one of them. I am not sure whether there has been a change in Lib Dem policy.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Yes.

Mr. Rooker: Oh, there has.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: No, I must make a bit of progress. I have not actually started my speech yet. I made those introductory remarks to get the tone of the debate right on the matters on which we are being attacked, one of which is pensioner incomes.

The hon. Member for Northavon sometimes talked about the basic state pension and sometimes about total pensioner incomes, although he never quite put it that way. If any right hon. or hon. Member knows a pensioner who lives on an income of £66.75 a week—the basic state pension—and who has no capital over £3,000, it is their bounden duty to ensure that he or she gets the benefit of the minimum income guarantee. Everywhere I hold meetings—including pensioners' convention meetings—I say, "Hands up, anybody who is getting only £66.75." I know that that is slightly unfair because, by their nature, such meetings may not be attended by the poorest, but so far, no one has put their hand up.

The Government are deliberately targeting resources on the poorest pensioners, but the reality of pensioner incomes is different. The average income for a pensioner couple now, on 1996–97 figures—the latest ones, which were published in 1998 in the pensioner income series, although we will have more up-to-date figures by the end of the month—is £248 a week. The average income for a single pensioner is £129 a week.

It is true that there is a difference with age. For couples in which the male is aged over 75, the average income is £226 a week, and for the others it is £259 a week. It is a fact that, as pensioners get older, their income falls. Among single pensioners, the average income for men is £141 a week, and for women it is £126. It is a myth that the generality of pensioners exist on £66.75 a week.

Mr. Simon Hughes: No one is saying that.

Mr. Rooker: The whole thrust of the speech by the hon. Member for Northavon was directed towards perpetuating that myth.

Mr. Corbyn: My right hon. Friend the Minister will have heard my intervention in the speech by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb). In the assessments made by my right hon. Friend's Department, what examination has been made of the cost of living index as it relates to pensioners in terms of transport costs, increased charges imposed by local authorities and the loss of former public facilities that now have to be paid for privately? All the evidence that I have seen suggests that pensioners are becoming significantly worse off because of cuts in local services.

Mr. Rooker: I say to my hon. Friend genuinely that the whole range of income is taken into account. I am giving average figures, which are the only ones any of us can give unless we use an individual example. In many ways, we succeed or fail in this place by giving individual examples of our constituents, but when we make a global assessment, we have to use averages based on pensioner incomes and expenditure. The factors that my hon. Friend mentioned are taken into account. We must remember that averages can be misleading. However, that does not alter the fact that the figures that I have given show that average pensioner incomes are now totally different to what they were 20 years ago.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am sure that the Minister understands that, even given the Government's present policy of the minimum income guarantee or the policy that he is right to say that we had at the last election—although we have moved on since—of a minimum basic income, a minority of pensioners do not get anything above the basic state pension. Will he confirm that there has never been a 100 per cent. take-up and that there probably never will be? If we are to meet the needs of the poorest pensioners, we must do something other than keeping the pension down and getting pensioners to make up the difference by applying for other benefits. Many people refuse to apply for those other benefits because they fear means testing and see it as degrading.

Mr. Rooker: I accept the point. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have three sets of benefits. We have the means-tested income benefits and the minimum income guarantee, for which we will shortly announce a Government-led, national take-up campaign. It will be a unique campaign for a Government to run.

However, many other benefits are not income related, yet their take-up remains a problem. For example, attendance allowance take-up by pensioners is about 40 per cent. of what we think that it should be. It is difficult to drive a take-up campaign on benefits that are not income related, but the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is right: the Government have a moral obligation and duty to target resources on the poorest pensioners. The campaign will cost several million pounds, and we shall announce the details shortly.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: My right hon. Friend gave some interesting statistics earlier that may surprise many people outside the House. Will not the figures for 1996–97 be substantially higher than those that he gave? Are there any projections about what those figures will be? All hon. Members want the state pension to be increased substantially, but the amount of correspondence

[Mr. Campbell-Savours]

that we receive on the level of the base pension has diminished. We need more accurate statistics that show the truth of what is going on in the country.

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is right to say that the figures will have changed from those that I quoted. However, the new pensioner income series figures for 1997-98 will be available before the end of the month, and the Department of Social Security will publish a paper on pensioner incomes shortly afterwards.

I will not go into the details, but a pensioner in my constituency made an inquiry of me last Friday evening. I had not met the gentleman before but, in the course of our conversation, I happened to see the pension forecast made for him just before he retired in May last year. His basic state pension was £66.75. He had a full, 100 per cent. national insurance pension after working in the engineering industry. The salaries that he had received were not massive, as he was not involved in highly skilled work. He had almost £6 in graduated pension from the system operating between 1961 and 1975, and his SERPS pension was well over £50.

My constituent's income was therefore more than £120—almost double the basic state pension. That is typical of three quarters of the people who are retiring now: they do not retire only on the basic state pension, as they also have the benefit of SERPS and the other pension. I shall deal with those receiving only the basic state pension shortly.

Average pensioner incomes have risen in the past 20 years, but the gap between the poorest pensioners and the most well-off has widened significantly. The incomes of the least well-off 20 per cent. of single pensioners have risen by only 28 per cent. in real terms, whereas the incomes of the richest 20 per cent. of pensioners have increased by 76 per cent. in real terms.

The main reason for the improvement in many pensioners' incomes has been the growth in incomes from occupational pensions and from investment. In 1979—three years before the left-wing firebrand's remarks referred to by the hon. Member for Northavon—43 per cent. of pensioners had occupational pensions. By 1996–97, that figure had risen to 65 per cent. Occupational pensions have been a massive success in this country, and the credit for that goes to all the parties and individuals involved. The contribution from Governments can be seen in the tax advantages associated with the schemes.

Since 1979, there has been an increase in real income from occupational pensions of 162 per cent. That is a very substantial increase, and the average amount of investment income received by all pensioners has doubled in real terms. The proportion of pensioners dependent on means-tested state benefits was 40 per cent. in 1996–97, including 28 per cent. of those who were recently retired. So about a quarter of today's pensioners are coming out of a lifetime of work on to the means test. That is a serious situation, which no Government can ignore. There is an overwhelming case for ensuring that we take effective action in respect of those pensioners, and that is what we have tried to do.

I suppose, when I look around the Chamber, that very few understand more than I do the feelings about the links between the basic state pension and prices rather than earnings.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The Rooker-Wise amendment.

Mr. Rooker: It has nothing to do with that.

When that link was introduced by the previous Labour Government—much to their credit—it operated for only four years, and was calculated wrongly for three of those four years. However, there is no doubt that it gave pensioners a real increase in the basic state pension.

Of course, there was no state earnings-related pension then: SERPS effectively started accumulating only from 1978. We were in a different situation. Nobody could have given the kind of total incomes that pensioners receive today, even in the values of 1979.

There were many years in which the basic state pension did not increase at all—1956, 1957, 1959 and 1960. It should have gone up in May 1964, but it did not; it should have gone up in November 1970, but it did not. I do not want to make a party political point, but a Conservative Government were in power on every one of those dates. So it was not the norm to have an annual increase and in some years—it happened in 1975 in particular—there were two increases because the Labour Government needed to make up the gap that had occurred before they came to power.

There are various beliefs that pensions have risen every year, that they have always been linked to earnings and that the basic state pension has always been enough to live on. Those are all myths; they are untrue.

Mr. Webb: Does the Minister accept the point that I made based on the Library's figures? History shows that, since the war, the pension has not simply been earnings-indexed but has risen as a share of average earnings from 14 to 20 per cent. The Minister may be saying that pensioners should be grateful for an annual increase but, since the war, Governments have done better than providing earnings indexation over a period of decades. Why is that so impossible now?

Mr. Rooker: That completely ignores the example that I gave from my constituency of someone who has just retired and has SERPS of more than £50 a week. Of course, those figures are based on the basic state pension—anyone can make those calculations, because we know the figures. They are universal, as long as people have the full 100 per cent. Succeeding Governments—and the graduated pension, from 1961 to 1975, was introduced by a Conservative Government—attempted to build on the basic state pension so that people received an amount that related to their earnings. That was an important element, but is never taken into account in statistics based on the basic state pension.

I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, but it is valid only if the basic state pension is total pensioner income. I refuse to accept that. One must consider the total pensioner income in the round, which is why Richard Crossman and Sir Keith Joseph, along with previous Ministers, attempted to make that break, to build on the basic state pension. Therefore, it is inevitable that there is fluctuation when prices are compared with earnings.

because one is looking at a moving target, based on individual circumstances. So, although I accept the hon. Gentleman's figures, I do not think that they paint a true picture, or do any service to pensioners—either pensioners of the future, who are thinking about saving for a pension, or today's pensioners.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Rooker: If the hon. Gentleman's intervention is as good as his previous one, then yes.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I hope that he will agree that, notwithstanding the importance of improving provision, it is of the essence that the existing system should be efficiently administered. Following the breakdown of NIRS2, which deprived thousands of pensioners of their legitimate entitlements, does he recall the "Dear colleague" letter of 11 September 1998 from the Secretary of State which said that the problem would be resolved in the next couple of weeks? However, on 28 January 1999, the right hon. Gentleman was forced to admit that it would be many months before the problem was completely resolved. Has it now been resolved, in each and every case?

Mr. Rooker: No. As I said in answering a question last week, the latest information from the Benefits Agency is that 83,000 cases are outstanding and we expect all to be settled this year. NIRS2 has been bad for pensioners—some have not been paid correctly, although some have been overpaid. That massive computer system—bought on the cheap by the Conservative Government—is crucial to many of our reforms. Bereavement allowances, state second pensions and stakeholder pensions all depend on the success of NIRS2, as does pensions forecasting.

There is no quick fix for the computer system, and delays, though regrettable, are inevitable. A quick fix would be irresponsible given the high dependency on the system of many policies, benefits payments and contracted-out rebates. We hope to settle the 83,000 cases—some underpayments, some overpayments—by the end of the year.

Let me turn to the costs implied by the hon. Member for Northavon in his speech; of course, no costs were mentioned in the Liberal Democrat motion, which makes no proposal. Increasing retirement pensions—and, we should not forget, linked benefits—by the average earnings index would cost £1 billion net in 2000, and £8 billion in 2010. I answered questions on this subject within the last week and in November, so I almost expect an intervention at this point. The single pension will go up to £67.50 a week in April but, if it had been linked to earnings or prices—whichever was higher—since 1979, when the link was broken, it would be £97, a difference of almost £20. The cost of bridging that gap in one go would be £13 billion net, including the additional cost of benefits linked to the retirement pension.

We have just under 11 million pensioners. By 2030, there will be almost 14 million, so the gross cost of even a modest change in April would be £30 billion a year by then. Much of that money would go to well-off pensioners. I do not claim that those on the average are well off, but they are much better off than people on income support, who would benefit less. That cannot be right. We do not apologise for using the basic state pension as a building block. No one is expected to live on that pension alone. For anyone who has no savings, there is other provision, such as the minimum income guarantee.

One of our traditional aims has been to concentrate help on the least well-off, while managing the system so that those who can do things for themselves do so without Government involvement. Since the second world war, the lack of a consensus on pensions has meant that no Government have been able to build for the long term. I do not say that people cannot trust Governments—that would be wrong, and unfair to Governments of both parties. However, the more provision people make for themselves via funded schemes and occupational pensions, the more secure they are bound to feel, given the history of pension provision.

By 2001-02, we shall spend £4 billion more in real terms on pensioners. We make no apology for that, as much of the money will be targeted at the poorest pensioners. Some 1.5 million pensioners are benefiting from the increase to the minimum income guarantee by £160 a year in real terms. Pensioner couples aged more than 80 and on income support will be £455 a year better off, in real terms, after this April's increase—that is more than £8 a week. The actions that we have taken will ensure that as many people as possible receive that extra benefit. We have not merely based our actions on research, but have piloted schemes to find the best way of organising the take-up of that benefit.

We are examining the rules on capital. Some of the points that the hon. Member for Northavon made about capital and savings are right. Our commitment is that, before the end of this Parliament, we shall have done something about capital limits, which have been frozen for so long. That is unfair on many pensioners—whether the limits are £3,000, £8,000 or £16,000. We shall deal with the matter—it is in the package.

However, it is true that part of the package is not about the least well-off—we make no apology about the winter fuel payments. To put that money into people's hands before Christmas, we needed a cut-off date in September, in order to pay £100 per pensioner household—indeed the amount will now be paid to all men and women aged over 60. If we had undertaken means-testing for the payments, it would have cost us £100 to organise each payment. That is why we acted in that way. The money is not targeted in the sense suggested by the hon. Gentleman, because we consider that it forms part of our policy of ensuring that the wider pensioner community should benefit from the economic performance of the country.

The same argument applies to television licences—free to the over-75s, but not means-tested. That is a further demonstration that we are spreading more of the country's income around the pensioner community.

I realise that the time for debate is short, so I shall come to a conclusion. The minimum tax guarantee and other measures have taken 200,000 pensioners out of tax, and two thirds of pensioners pay no income tax at all. The VAT cut on fuel affected everybody, but fuel is a disproportionately high part of pensioner expenditure, so pensioners also benefited from that cut.

[Mr. Rooker]

One of the most despicable and cheapskate policies of the Conservative Government was the removal of free eye tests for pensioners. We have reintroduced those tests.

There is a new home energy efficiency scheme for those over-60s who receive an income-related benefit. The maximum grant will be increased from the present £315 to £2,000. That will be of substantial benefit to about 460,000 households over the first two years, 280,000 of which will be households whose members are aged more than 60.

We could develop that package. However, we make no apology; we have stuck to our manifesto commitment. We have ensured that the extra resources are targeted on the poorest pensioners, who are substantially better off than they were when the Government came to power. We know that, over the totality, general pensioner incomes are much higher than the basic state pension. To ignore that fact does an absolute disservice to pensioners—as did the contribution of the hon. Member for Northavon.

4.28 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate and to hear the Minister of State lauding the achievements of the Conservative Government over 18 years, as many pensioners now retire on considerably more than the basic state pension. On the other hand, it is a shame that we had to listen to a typical Liberal motion. Many of us who have fought the Liberals in many elections will recognise the technique. The measure sounds supportive and costs a huge amount. As we discovered during the debate, their minds were changed halfway through the formation of their policy and they have ducked all the decisions.

The motion does not say what Liberal Democrat policy is, although the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) tried hard to explain it. It smacks of the luxury of perpetual opposition, as do so many of their promises. They promised extra police officers and to double child benefit. They would take child support back to the courts—that would be £800 million. As we discovered this afternoon, they would use up the national insurance fund surplus. That would have a direct effect on the retail prices index.

All those measures would add significantly—

Mr. Corbyn: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Lait: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to complete what I was saying on this fairly substandard Liberal motion, I shall be delighted to give way.

Those combined changes would add a huge amount to public spending, which I am sure that the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) will be keen to rein back when he does his sums for his Budget statement.

Mr. Corbyn: Before the hon. Lady completes her litany of past mistakes, will she explain why, in 1980, the Conservative Government broke the link with earnings? Ever since, the pension has been deteriorating as a proportion of earnings. The whole pensioner community feels robbed by 18 years of Conservative government. Is the hon. Lady suggesting that she would reinstate the link with earnings, as many of us would wish to do?

Mrs. Lait: Interestingly, we have heard the Minister explain why the Government are not restoring that link. Although the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) probably believes that everyone in Islington retires on only the basic state pension, as a result of our changes two thirds of all pensioners now retire on considerably more than that.

We have heard from the Government this afternoon great appreciation of everything that has been done in the past 18 years. The Minister expressed an intention to continue many of the things that we introduced. I should think that it is a great comfort to many pensioners that the Government have not yet tinkered with many of them. However, just last week—it was very opportune—I received, from a constituent who has given me permission to use his name, a critique of the 75p by which the state pension is being increased. Mr. Frederick Pemberton, who lives in Beckenham, had written earlier complaining about it and then produced a critique of the reply that he received from the Department. He starts:

"This so-called Promised Land.

Five per cent. VAT on fuel. This VAT cut is not specifically for pensioners, but for all households.

Twenty million pounds to improve cataract service. Fifty million pounds to boost cardiac care. Again the two services are for all the country.

Concessionary bus passes. As I live in one of the London boroughs I receive a free bus pass. This scheme has been in existence for at least 12 years.

The home energy efficiency scheme and locks and bolts. This applies to 150,000 pensioners. That works out at 0.13 per cent. of pensioners in the country. As a home owner, I do not qualify."

Mr. Pemberton continues:

"Ten pounds for the free eyesight test. As pensioners only purchase spectacles once in five years, this generous grant works out at 4p a week.

Free television licences. Thousands of homes in the country have a pensioner over the age of 75 living with them. They are the ones who will also benefit from the free licence."

He went on to say that his and his wife's income will increase by 1.1 per cent. plus the winter fuel payment, which makes a total of £3.40 a week.

Mr. Pemberton's letter reflects the comments that I have heard from many pensioners. It would be wise for everyone to recognise that even affluent areas such as Bromley contain pockets of real deprivation and that pensioners, as reflected in that letter, feel badly let down.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): Does this mean that the hon. Lady wants to take away the free eye tests that the Government have given pensioners?

Mrs. Lait: I was merely pointing out that it has a marginal effect on any pensioner's income.

The minimum income guarantee, from which we hope that many pensioners can benefit—including the 600,000 who currently do not—is an extension of means testing, with all the problems that go with that. It is only for people on income support. Pensioners with any savings

do not qualify. *[Interruption.]* If that is not correct, I would be more than happy for the Minister to let me know.

Mr. Rooker: I will correct what the hon. Lady said, because people listen to what we say in this place. She said that if a pensioner has any savings, he does not qualify. That is not true. There are capital limits of £3,000 and £8,000, and I have said that we shall address those figures—by implication, raising them—before the end of this Parliament.

Mrs. Lait: I am delighted to learn that people with savings of £3,000 and £8,000 will benefit from the minimum income guarantee. However, 600,000 people do not claim the benefit for reasons that the much vaunted research has produced, but which many of us have known for many years. All the Government have done is waste money on research that has told us what we already know. People find the process of claiming for means-testing off-putting and they do not like the stigma attached to it. We have been aware of that, as have the Government, for many years. However, the right hon. Gentleman tells us that the Government will carry out yet more research to find out how they can best sell the minimum income guarantee. It will cost several millions more pounds to try to ensure that those 600,000 people benefit from it.

As I understand it, the recommendations in the report that was published on 13 December said that the most sensible, and probably the cheapest, way of ensuring that everyone knows about the minimum income guarantee is to write confidentially to all those who may be eligible for it. If it will cost several million pounds for the 600,000 pensioners who do not claim, it would be interesting to examine the administrative costs of the scheme.

We fundamentally object to the minimum income guarantee because it is a disincentive to save. Like the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), I spent a large part of last year on the Committee considering the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999, which introduced the stakeholder pension. Tomorrow, we shall start to consider the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, which will introduce the state second pension.

As I understand it, both pensions will be worth what people can already claim under the minimum income guarantee and housing and council tax benefits. If that is so, I will be dissatisfied. Who on a tight budget and with a small income will put money into either the stakeholder pension or the state second pension? Why bother? If people have to manage on a tight budget and the kids need shoes, who will put money into a pension? I have yet to receive an answer to that question from the Government, but it must be dealt with. There is no reason for people in such circumstances to buy into either of those pensions.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Can I trigger the hon. Lady's memory? Does she recall the great debates of the 1970s when Labour pioneered the state earnings-related pension scheme? That was 30 years ago, and the whole country looked forward to substantial pensions well into the future and past the millennium. However, does she remember what happened in the 1980s when I sat on the Opposition Benches and we watched SERPS being progressively undermined and destroyed by a Conservative Government? Why does not she refer to what happened in the 1980s?

Mrs. Lait: The hon. Gentleman must recognise that SERPS has been made affordable, as have private occupational pensions. They are just as important because more and more people wish to save outwith the Government's provision. They realise that, if they have a private pension over which they have control, they are not at the whim—dare I say it—of politicians. I support them entirely. It is infinitely better to be in control of one's own money.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Can the hon. Lady cast her mind back as far as last week and answer the question that was put to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts)? If it is not possible for people to contribute to the state second pension or the stakeholder pension, how can people with earnings of less than £9,500 a year possibly afford a private pension scheme?

Mrs. Lait: The hon. Lady has entirely missed the point. The state second pension and the stakeholder pension are not sufficiently attractive to encourage people to save. That is because of the package of benefits that they would otherwise receive. However, I have been generous with my time. To allow many other hon. Members to speak, I hope that I shall be allowed to draw my remarks to a relatively speedy conclusion.

The Minister of State referred to the problems that pensioners are having as a result of NIRS2 computer failings. I am reassured that those failings will be cleared up at some time during the coming year, as the Benefits Agency hopes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) has said, that is a year late already.

Given the catalogue of problems that pensioners have faced, does anyone blame them for not wanting to be involved with the Government? They have been hit by advance corporation tax, and future pensioners are now realising the cost. Only last week, my hon. Friend pointed out in social security questions that the Manchester local authority will have to find an extra £30 million. Cornwall will have to find an extra £35 million and Staffordshire an extra £75 million. That will have an effect on pensioners' council tax, which is already increasing because the Government are downloading their stealth taxes on to local authorities.

Pensioners are being hit also by the fuel duty increase. They wait and wait for their NHS appointments and operations. Poor pensioners who have saved in shares can no longer reclaim tax. They are now hit by a 75p increase in their pension, which they think is measly. To add insult to injury, the Department of Social Security is saving itself money. It estimated a 1.3 per cent. increase in the state pension but it is paying out only 1.1 per cent. It could at least pay, as we would, the invalid care allowance to new carers over 65 years of age. That would cost about £20 million and would be of direct help to many elderly people, as it would recognise the reality of looking after an elderly husband or wife.

Mr. Webb: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Lait: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will excuse me for not giving way on this occasion. Doubtless there will be many opportunities to discuss these matters in the coming weeks.

[Mrs. Lait]

Pensioners will receive a 75p increase in their pensions, out of which they will pay the increased fuel duty, increased transport costs and their increased council tax. Doubtless many of them will pay these increased costs out of their £100 heating allowance. Is that what the Government really wanted?

4.42 pm

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): I am aware that many Members on both sides of the House want to speak in this short debate. My first observation, in response to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, is that I accept that many Labour Members signed an early-day motion on the 75p a week increase. We had a perfect right to indicate to the Government that, although we appreciate what they have been doing for pensioners, we want them to go a step further. There is nothing wrong with that, and signing the motion should not be seen as a criticism of the Government. I for one will not be in the Lobby with the Liberal Democrats this evening. I wish to clear up that point straight away.

The hon. Member for Northavon referred to statistics going back to the period after the second world war. Anyone who worked in industry after that war will be aware of the various changes that have taken place in terms of pensions and so forth. In the early 1970s, not many people had occupational pensions. They have come on to the scene fairly recently, over the past 10 or 15 years. However, I can tell the official Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), that I remember when the previous Government—the Thatcher Government—were encouraging people, through tax incentives, to get out of state earnings-related pension schemes and into private pension schemes. We all know the story. There were certain instances of people not benefiting from those schemes because of some of the abuses that took place under the Conservative Government. Those abuses were never addressed by that Government. We have had many debates in the House about that.

It is interesting that the hon. Member for Northavon wants to use the surpluses from the social security budget. Many of us would like to take a good look at that proposal. We must be careful when we start to spend surpluses. If the hon. Gentleman knows anything about local government expenditure, he will be aware of the need to keep money for a rainy day. It is necessary to be careful also about money that is put away and to ensure that inflation does not lead to greater problems further down the road. Consideration should also be given to the economic situation and the country's circumstances at a given time.

In general terms, the pensions issue has been a minefield over the past 20 or 25 years.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I am listening with great interest. Does not the hon. Gentleman share the Prime Minister's confidence that we shall continue to become a wealthier nation? Is he betraying the tendency that I so often see in older people—that of not recognising when a rainy day has arrived? The plight of pensioners is now such that they are in the rain and should be helped.

Mr. Cunningham: I learn lessons from the pensioners: always prepare for a rainy day. That is good housekeeping. I have complete confidence in the Prime Minister's analysis of the economy. If the hon. Gentleman wants to increase taxes, he must first ensure that the economy is prosperous and, secondly, that he does not set loose another bout of very high inflation that erodes benefits to pensioners. He should take such factors into consideration when making interventions.

The official Opposition accused the Government of using stealth to off-load costs onto local authorities, but nobody was more adroit at that than the previous Government, who implemented cuts in housing benefit and in local authorities' administrative costs in respect of housing and other benefits, thus making central Government savings. That was one of the reasons they claimed they were able to reduce taxation. The Opposition spokesperson must be reminded of the millions of pensioners under her Government who had to rely on local authorities, which were left to try to fund free travel or to compensate pensioners for travel. This Government have made an attempt to address those matters.

I deal now with some of the matters that concern pensioners in Coventry. One is the relationship between pensions and earnings. It would be wrong of me not to mention it; I have regularly received representations on it. I recognise that the Government, through their package of measures, to which I shall come, are doing a number of things for pensioners. Over this Parliament, they will start to address such concerns.

Pensioners are also concerned about the future of the welfare state. Only last week, the Social Security Secretary indicated that there would be a two-tier pension, which was part of our manifesto. There was also a commitment to the continuation of SERPS—in contrast to the suggestion of the hon. Member for Northavon, who seemed to imply that there was some hidden agenda to abolish SERPS. I have seen no such agenda. The Secretary of State implied that we would not only honour our election pledge, but retain SERPS. The hon. Gentleman, who I am sure was present for that exchange, should know that.

More must be done on the funding of care in the community. The Government have begun the work; they have described certain measures that they are prepared to take. There is also the matter of the cost of sheltered accommodation, which affects many pensioners. I know that the Government will also consider that.

We should not forget that, although we have had difficulties in the national health service, the Government have begun to pump in the £21 billion for the next three years, which is vital.

Let us consider what the Government are doing for pensioners. The Opposition spokesperson derided free eye tests because someone had written her a letter saying that it apparently costs £10 every so often. I remember that when free eye tests were abolished, many in the Tory party were up in arms about it. Regardless of whether the figure in the letter is right, such a move created much consternation.

The other part of the package that shows that we are trying to do something for pensioners—it has been raised many times in the House—is the provision of free television licences for the over-75s. That is an important step—perhaps not for some people, but certainly for pensioners. I remember, one Friday morning, the previous Government's bitter opposition to what we used to call winter chill payments. This Government have taken the matter into consideration and provided £100 a year for help with fuel payments, which is certainly welcome among many pensioners whom I know. In addition, they have reduced VAT on fuel.

I do not want to go on too long, because I am conscious of the fact that a number of hon. Members from both sides of the House want to speak. I realise that this is a limited debate, but I thought that I should raise certain points of importance to some of the constituents whom I represent.

4.50 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): It is a great pleasure to be able to contribute to the debate. Like many hon. Members, I believe that the safety of pensioners' incomes is crucial, and that it is vital that we debate it. I was a co-sponsor of the early-day motion on which the wording of the motion is based.

I do not entirely accept the assertion of the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who is no longer in his place, that the content of his postbag suggests that pensioners are no longer interested in the state retirement pension. The experience of many hon. Members will be different from his. Perhaps pensioners as a class are suffering from exhaustion—sick and tired of making the same points throughout 18 years of Conservative Government and almost three years of Labour Government. They are beginning to despair of ever being given a fair deal.

I could go into great detail about the plight of pensioners, but I do not want to over-egg the pudding. I do not want to suggest that the situation for every pensioner is dire: that transparently is not so. On the way to the House today, I listened to an interesting discussion on my car radio about a television advertisement that seems to be shown every five minutes, depicting an elderly lady doing her exercises while watering her plants. I shall not mention the private company that it promotes, but the interesting discussion on the radio was about whether the image of elderly people that the advertisement portrays was appropriate. There are arguments on both sides, but it is clear that none of us should give the impression that all pensioners are in desperate financial straits, because they are not.

That does not alter the fact that some pensioners are in dire straits. Some of them live in great poverty, and their situation worsens year by year. There is a second group of pensioners who cannot be classed as poor under the general definition of that term, but whose incomes are being eroded, and the increases that they are being offered in the retirement pension package are insufficient to meet their increasing needs as individuals trying to lead their lives.

To be fair to him, the Minister accepted that there is a clear differentiation in the average figures. Pensioner wealth may be increasing because more people who are slightly better off are entering the system and more people who are in considerable poverty are leaving it for one reason or another. However, the relative wealth of the individual pensioner entering the system may decrease year by year, which is why we have strongly advocated the need for different treatment of the more elderly pensioner who has different needs.

I was concerned by the Minister's response. He knows that I have enormous respect for him—I have told him that on other occasions and on different subjects. However, elements of the right hon. Gentleman's speech were disingenuous. He set up a series of straw men that it was convenient to knock down. He contended that my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) was suggesting that the majority of pensioners were wholly and solely reliant on the standard state pension. My hon. Friend never said that; it is not in the motion; and no one is suggesting that it is the case. While increases in the state pension form a significant part of the calculations that any pensioner will make in regard to the affordability of what he or she will need in the following year, no one is suggesting that a huge number of pensioners live solely on the state pension—although some do.

The Minister suggested that we were dealing with the absolute level of pension payments, rather than the increase in the absolute level. That, too, is an important distinction. If the year-on-year increases do not match a realistic rate of inflation for pensioners, pensioners, relatively, are becoming poorer, and no amount of fiddling with the figures will alter that basic fact. The question that we must consider is whether it is right for pensioners to be getting poorer while the country is getting richer. Our position is plain: we believe that that should not be the case, and that pensioners can and should expect a better deal from the country.

Mr. Bercow: I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman's speech. Is he aware that, between 1979 and 1996, the proportion of pensioners in the bottom fifth of national income distribution fell from just under half the total to just under a quarter? To aid us in considering what he has to say, can he tell us what proportion of pensioners fall into the bottom fifth of national income distribution in the constituency of Somerton and Frome?

Mr. Heath: It will not surprise the House to learn that I do not have the answer to that specific question before me, and possibly the Minister does not either. I can say, however, that to talk of proportions as the hon. Gentleman does disguises the truth of the situation. If the number of pensioners falls as a proportion of the total number of people receiving benefits, such as the unemployed, of course the proportion will fall. Most of us recall the massive increase in the number of unemployed people under the Conservative Government. I suggest that what the hon. Gentleman has said actually means very little, and that it certainly does little to benefit debate if, having researched a specific bit of information, an hon. Member then presents it as a genuine interrogation of another hon. Member who has the Floor and is trying to pursue an argument.

The Minister made too much of reliance on other pension payments. He was at pains to tell us about all the other potential sources of income for pensioners, and how buoyant they were. That, too, avoids the basic issue in the motion, which is the increase in the basic state pension. The right hon. Gentleman failed to be quite so forthcoming in answering an important question put by

[Mr. Heath]

my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon about the measure by which pensions are indexed. It is transparently clear to anyone who has examined the position that the present basket of costs making up the measure of indexation is wholly inappropriate to pensioners. Nothing could illustrate that more clearly than mortgage interest payments, which have a hugely distorting effect.

I agree with the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn). Why do we not look at the package of payments to which pensioners are subject, especially the payments demanded by public authorities for services that pensioners need in their daily lives? Why is that not taken into account in establishing the basis for indexation? Such a system would at least approach a fair assessment of what the increase in costs is likely to be over the following year, rather than producing an arbitrary figure bearing little relation to the real lives of real pensioners.

The Government's official response in their amendment to what is a simple and easy-to-understand proposition from the Liberal Democrats is almost an essay on all the novel means of funding that they have devised to avoid doing something about the old age pension. Most of those are in the form either of one-off payments or of hypothecated measures. The Government talk about hypothecated taxation, but I did not realise that that meant that, through the benefits system, they would hypothecate what the recipient did with the taxation. That seems to be what the Government are trying to do in the case of pensioners: to determine what pensioners should do and give them money that is directly related to an activity irrespective of whether they wish to partake of it.

The amendment draws attention to some measures that I welcome. A long time ago, I was an optician, so I welcome the reintroduction of free eye tests, although I question whether the Government have extended them to the people who are most vulnerable in ophthalmic terms—40 to 50-year-olds, who are most likely to suffer glaucoma or retinopathies—but that is a separate issue. It is a good measure, which I personally applaud.

The television licence measure has introduced new anomalies to the system. That is one criticism of it, although, in intention, it is not a bad measure. However, we keep on coming back to the point: why do we have all these tactics to divert us away from the basic critical element—the retirement pension and how we even start catching up after the disastrous effects of the Conservative Government's decisions? How do we start to make progress in catching up so that pensioners get back to something like the position that should exist?

I understand the Minister's position when he says that to try to catch up in one go is beyond the Government's capability. Of course, we all understand that. We know that we cannot simply replace—

Mr. Rooker *rose—*

Mr. Heath: It looks as if the Minister would like to intervene. I am happy to give way.

Mr. Rooker: What the hon. Gentleman has just said gives me an opportunity to correct something that I said earlier. I said that catching up in one go would cost £13 billion. That figure is correct, but I also said that catching up meant £20 a week on the single pension. I managed to subtract £67.50 from £97.45 and make it £20, instead of £30, for which I apologise. I hope that *Hansard* will take due note of that. However, the cost of catching up in one go would still be £13 billion net.

Mr. Heath: The Minister has now removed one of the lines from my speech, but it was clearly a slip of the tongue. It does not alter what he said about the £13 billion. Of course, we accept that such a huge sum will not be spent at once, but what worries many Liberal Democrats and a significant number of Labour Members is that we have not even begun catching up.

I believe that that was what pensioners expected from the Government. They did not expect a change of Government but not a change of policy. That is the problem that most of us have with the Government's performance. We are still waiting for a fair deal for pensioners. Pensioners constantly express to us their grievous disappointment with what has happened to date. They are not ungrateful for what has been done, but they believe that it is not enough, is not coming soon enough and is not dealing with the basic issue of the state retirement pension, the erosion of which continues.

That is why the motion is important. It is a great shame that we cannot develop the cross-party support that I know exists.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): May I ask the hon. Gentleman a simple question which generates significant debate in pensioner meetings when I ask it? What answer does he get when he asks his pension groups, "Do you think rich pensioners should get as much help as poor pensioners, or do you think that the Government are right to try to target help at poor pensioners first?"

Mr. Heath: My answer would be that I have a curious devotion to the principle of progressive taxation. That is a useful way in which to deal with that issue, although perhaps that view is not now widely shared in the House.

Today, we had the opportunity of assembling that cross-party coalition of interests that really might have made a significant point to Ministers on this issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon said, if that coalition had been assembled, it would have hugely reduced the Government's majority. He used the word "decimated" to describe the reduction, but was immediately challenged by Conservative Members on the word's meaning. However, I thought that he used it correctly, as the 10 per cent. of hon. Members who stayed loyal to the Government—rather than the 90-percent majority who were prepared to express their view—would have paid the price. That cohort should have been grateful for the opportunity to express their opinion on a very important matter.

After hearing the speech of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), I think that the most confusing aspect of today's debate lies in determining what on earth Conservative Members' position on the issue might be. Although the hon. Lady did not allow interventions late in her speech—so that hon. Members were not able to clarify the position—we were expecting to be told Conservative Members' opinion on a crucial issue and their answer to a very simple question: is the 75p increase adequate or inadequate? We still do not know their answer to the question, as the hon. Lady seemed happy to speak about anything other than the motion on the Order Paper.

Such reticence was unexpected, given the brief letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), the leader of the Liberal Democrats, from the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), who, in the last paragraph, states:

"As to our voting intentions on the up-rating statement, we will make our position clear nearer the time."

If we are to learn the official Opposition's position on the matter, we really are going to have to run to the wire on it.

Conservative Members simply cannot decide whether 75p is adequate or inadequate. Is it a difficult answer to give? I think that it is not. The Government say that the increase is adequate; Liberal Democrat Members say that it is inadequate; Conservative Members do not know. The official Opposition's position is that they do not know whether it is adequate. If they choose to abstain in the vote at the end of the debate, the British people will have the clearest demonstration possible of why the official Opposition simply cannot provide a credible opposition on behalf of the many pensioners who were expecting their support today. I say that pensioners were expecting Conservative Members' support today, although after 18 years of Conservative Government perhaps they were not.

It is important that we have had this debate, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply to it. I also hope that we have been able to make a point on behalf of British pensioners—which is simply that we do not believe that it is right that, year after year, their pension entitlement should suffer from erosion, they should get poorer, and that, in town and country alike, they should find themselves in miserable conditions. Let us not forget that rural pensioner poverty is a very real issue and that many pensioners in rural areas do not have access to the services that those in urban areas expect.

If we cannot have a debate on the subject that is sensible, addresses the issues and produces results, Parliament is failing those who deserve our support.

5.8 pm

Mr. Roger Berry (Kingswood): I suppose that recently many of us have been reflecting on the previous century. One of the great unsung achievements of that century is the fact that the number of people of retiring age has increased dramatically. In the century's first census, in 1901, about half a million people were over 75; at the century's last census, the figure was more than 4 million. The increase is hardly surprising. In 1908, when the old age pension was first introduced, for people over 70, average male life expectancy was a mere 48 years.

The previous century witnessed a dramatic improvement in longevity. That is something to be celebrated. We often forget that major achievement of the past century, which has left us with about 11 million pensioners in this country—about one in four of the electorate. The majority lead active lives, participating fully in the community and living independently with their friends and neighbours.

It is shocking when people talk about the demographic time bomb, as if there were a problem with more people living longer than we can afford. Not only is that an inaccurate description of current plans for funding retirement, but it is deeply offensive to 11 million people and their friends and relatives.

The situation that the Government inherited, as set out in the Government amendment, is characterised by two obvious facts. First, the number of pensioners living in poverty was increasing—the figure stood at one pensioner in four at the time of the election. Secondly, pensioners had a growing dependence on means-tested benefits. The new Labour Government had to address those two key problems.

I congratulate the Government on their significant achievements in addressing the needs of today's pensioners. The minimum income guarantee has resulted in record increases in income support of three times normal levels. There is a commitment that those levels will rise in line with earnings. The Government are also committed to a take-up campaign. It is slightly overdue, but no doubt that is because they are determined to get it right. I have close relatives who are almost certainly entitled to income support and I am concerned that accurate information should be made available. It is better to spend a little time on the take-up campaign and ensure that it works, but it has to be a priority. I hope that the Government will consider retrospective payments to those who have missed out so far because they have known nothing about the minimum income guarantee.

I welcome the free eye tests for pensioners, the increase in the winter fuel payments and the free television licences for those over 75. In case anyone has any doubts, the Liberal Democrats welcome them too. The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) and I share a parliamentary boundary. We also happen to have all or part of our constituencies within the area covered by South Gloucestershire county council. Last year, the Liberal Democrats on that council voted for a resolution that included the following:

"the council therefore welcomes the current Labour Government's commitment to pensioners as demonstrated by its fivefold increase in winter fuel payments, free eye tests for pensioners and cutting VAT on domestic fuel to 5 per cent., the lowest level allowed and notes the current Labour Government's effort to start to address this problem"—

the problem of poverty, that is—

"by introducing a minimum income guarantee for pensioners which will be uprated in line with earnings rather than prices from April 2000."

Liberal Democrat and Labour councillors from my local authority pointed out:

"On present estimates, it will mean that the poorest pensioners will be getting nearly £800 a year more as a couple and nearly £500 a year more as a single pensioner, than they did in 1997".

I am pleased that there is common ground in congratulating the Government on their significant measures to address the needs of pensioners.

However, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham), I admit that I signed early-day motion No. 73, the words of which are exactly the same as the motion today. The motion may have been tabled for reasons about which one could speculate, but as a matter of fact, I believe that April's 75p increase is inadequate. I believe that there should be a real-terms increase in the basic retirement pension. If I did not believe that, I would not have signed the motion. Having done so—and not taken my name off the motion—I still believe that. My position would otherwise be rather difficult.

I believe that 75p is not enough—first, because that is overwhelmingly the view of the public. My constituents who have contacted me and stopped me at the post

[Mr. Roger Berry]

office—pensioners have discovered that this is an effective way of getting their point across to their Member of Parliament—have made it clear that a real increase in the pension, and not just one to match inflation, would be warmly welcomed. I have no doubt also that every organisation representing pensioners would welcome a real increase in the basic retirement pension. I am convinced that every trade union would take the same view, not least because their members are future pensioners.

I would go so far as to say that if the Government had decided to increase the basic state pension by slightly more than inflation, I suspect that there would not have been much opposition from Labour Back Benchers. People would not have said, "In principle, this is the wrong thing to do." I suspect that there might have been a fair amount of support.

Secondly, at present, a real increase in the basic state pension is the only way to help the poorest 750,000 to 1 million pensioners who are entitled to income support but do not claim it. It is the only way to improve their incomes and to relieve their poverty.

Thirdly, increasing the basic state pension would reduce the number of people dependent on means testing, which is a clear objective of Government policy. Fourthly, it would increase saving. Everyone has acknowledged that means testing penalises saving. That is why the Government, rightly, are reviewing the capital limits. We all know of many people who, because of their modest savings, are just above the income support level and cannot access significant improvements in their income unless the basic state pension improves.

The final reason why I signed the motion—and why I have left my name on it—is that its proposals are entirely consistent with Labour's election commitment. At the election, we said that the

"basic state pension will be retained as the foundation of pension provision".

It is difficult to envisage how the basic state pension can be that foundation unless in some way it keeps up with rising living standards. We said also that the basic state pension would increase

"at least in line with prices".

We did not say that it would increase only in line with prices. Along with my colleagues, I signed an early-day motion that was entirely consistent with the policy on which we fought the election.

I shall support the Government amendment tonight. However, I cannot, in all conscience, vote against the Liberal Democrats' motion—for the very simple reason that I support it.

5.20 pm

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry), who does his career no good by speaking from his heart; I am glad that he, for one, will stick to his guns on the motion that he signed.

The Government have two defences against the motion moved so ably by the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb). I do not always agree with what he says, but he always adduces strong arguments in support of his case. The Government say that they simply cannot afford to restore the link with earnings and that it is better to concentrate resources on those who need them most. Those are understandable arguments.

There is the TINA argument—the old Thatcherite argument that there is no alternative—that we cannot restore the link because it would cost us up to £8 billion over 10 years. No one argues that we would go bankrupt, because we are such a wealthy country, but it is argued that the public finances would be seriously affected.

There is a universality argument: that such would be the reaction of taxpayers to an increase in public expenditure that there would be pressure for the basic state pension to be means-tested; there is also a demographic argument, that we are an increasingly greying population; and there is the argument, to which I am sympathetic, that people's willingness to invest in private pensions would be affected. There is also a ratchet effect argument, but that is so complex, and we have so little time, that I had better leave it for another day.

Everyone seems to accept those arguments, but I am not sure that they are as strong as people make out. The Government actuary, in his quinquennial review, said:

"Real earnings growth will result in working people being relatively better off in future even if National Insurance contribution rates were to be increased to meet the cost of increasing flat-rate benefits in line with earnings. Based on gross pay and real earnings growth of 1.5% per annum, real earnings relative to prices will, in the year 2060, be approximately 2.5 times the corresponding level in 1999/00. Allowing for higher National Insurance contribution rates and earnings limits, someone on average male earnings would still have real net earnings, after National Insurance contributions, of approximately 2.4 times current levels."

That means that, because our economy is growing so well, we could afford to restore the link and people in work would still be better off.

Before the Social Security Committee, the Government actuary said:

"The point is that those who are working and contributing would still be a lot better off than they are today even if we were deducting contributions to enable the earnings link to be maintained."

I am not arguing that we should restore the link but emphasising the fact that such is the wealth being generated in our economy that we could do more to help the basic state pension. It may have been right to break the link all those years ago, but we could consider being more generous now. There are also other ways in which we could help with pensions in the private sector to avoid means testing.

The Government argue that they are concentrating resources on the pensioners who are most in need and that there is no point in spreading the butter very thinly all over the place. The Department of Social Security has published an interesting research summary in its report No. 100. It has conducted research into the attitudes of those who should be claiming income support but are not. It says that 48 per cent. of pensioners still appear to be "entitled non-recipients" of income support.

The report says that people who are entitled to the means-tested benefits of the minimum income guarantee are not claiming them because there is "an attitudinal component"—I apologise for the social-security speak that runs through the document, but it is the Government's document and that is why I am quoting it—

"which here is broadly described as the 'stigma' dimension. The pensioners wished to remain independent and self sufficient in older age, they expressed a concern that claiming IS could be a threat to their pride and independence."

The second reason is

"a process dimension, consisting of objections to, or negative perceptions of, various aspects of the claim process. For some these negative images were based on past memories and images of the history of the social security system. Images of those claiming benefits tended to be negative, viewing claimants as 'spongers' or 'scroungers'."

Although the Government would argue that we have left behind the workhouse mentality of the 19th century and pensioners who have not made adequate contributions for their futures are not forced into workhouses, pensioners feel forced into some sort of mental workhouse when they are told that they must apply for certain benefits. Many pensioners do not want to do so.

Mr. Coaker: If there is such a problem with means-tested benefits, why is it that in my surgeries claims by pensioners for means-tested benefits such as housing benefit or council tax benefit are not affected? There is an attitudinal problem, but debates in which we continue to talk about stigma and income support will not help.

Mr. Leigh: I cannot accept that. I am not making the facts up: they come from the Government's document. Those applying for means-tested benefits are often younger people, many of whom are out to get every benefit they can. There is nothing wrong in that, if they are entitled to the benefits. However, those younger people are very different from the older people who were brought up in a fine tradition and who are proud to be pensioners. They feel that they have paid their debt to society, worked all their lives and looked forward to retiring. They feel that it is a judgment against themselves to have to apply for means-tested benefits and they do not want to do so. I am not making the situation worse by talking about it, because we have to be honest and address it. There is something wrong with our social security system.

On the other hand, our pensioners are generally doing very well. The statistics come pouring in, but they show that the richest pensioners have become some 80 per cent. better off over the past two decades. Even the poorest pensioners, thanks to means-tested benefits, are a third better off. In material terms, pensioners may be better off, but whether they are happy about how that has been achieved is another question.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his introductory remarks. Does he accept that the statistics are misleading, because they do not follow an individual pensioner over time? Over time, individual pensioners see their incomes maintained or falling, as inflation erodes the real value of their income, but the averages include the fact that the poorest old pensioners have died and the newly retired ones have whopping great occupational pensions. The averages shoot up, but any given pensioner is seeing not 30 per cent. rises but steady real-terms falls.

Mr. Leigh: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. We should be very cautious about accepting the many statistics that are given to us. The statistic that I have just cited has appeared in many briefing notes over the years and is a good little quotation to bring up in defence of the Government of the day, but it may not accurately reflect the experience of an individual pensioner.

Mr. Bercow: Do not poor take-up rates underline the need for Governments to do everything in their power to minimise unavoidable pensioner costs? Would not one effective way in which to do that be for the Government to work to the maximum to change fundamentally that charter for amoral pilfering otherwise known as the common agricultural policy?

Mr. Leigh: I shall not go down that route, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I know that you would take me to task. However, my hon. Friend is right to say that our country has a tradition of fair and uncorrupt Government.

The Liberal Democrats may be right to say that it is an insult to pay pensioners an April increase of only 75p for the year, when the economy is supposed to be doing well. Perhaps we could afford £1, although I do not want to go too far. As the Minister said, pensions have not always increased in line with inflation: sometimes they have risen by more, sometimes they have not moved at all. No hard and fast rule states that the 75p increment cannot be changed.

The case can be argued in terms of what can be done immediately to help pensioners, and what can be done in the long term. Our room for manoeuvre for helping existing pensioners may be limited, but the long-term prospects are much more exciting and interesting because the future allows more room for manoeuvre.

The previous Government succeeded in changing people's attitudes. Philip Booth, in *Economic Affairs*, said:

"The OECD looked at long-term budget deficits and national debt figures for various countries, on the assumption that their state social-insurance schemes remain intact. The estimates were based on the assumption of 1995 policies continuing. By 2030, Germany was projected to have a budget deficit of 9 per cent. of GDP and a debt:GDP ratio of over 100 per cent. Figures for France were similar. Italy was projected to have a budget deficit of 30 per cent. and a debt:GDP ratio of 120 per cent. The UK had a projected budget surplus and a projected debt:GDP ratio of below 10 per cent."

One of the Conservative Government's greatest achievements was to increase dramatically the resources put into private pensions and occupational pensions. I want that sort of response to continue.

I am talking about the long term, and what I propose will not have any direct benefit for today's pensioners. However, I hope that the next Conservative Government will build on the work of this Labour Government, who are trying to create a basic pension system that raises people above means-tested benefits. The Government argue that that is what the stakeholder pension and the second pension will do, but there are more creative ways to give people a choice about where their money should be invested.

People's money should be invested in their own personal funds. People should be allowed to retain those funds in the public sector. They should have the right to insist on that. Alternatively, they could go into a mutual friendly society, or into a private insurance scheme. The result would be a personally funded system, which the Government could not attack as they have attacked the SERPS principle. However, I accept that that is a long-term solution and that it does not help the immediate problem.

Earlier, I talked about the workhouse. I have often noted that Labour Members of Parliament explain their calling by referring to a novel—"The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists", by Robert Tressell—that moved them in

[Mr. Leigh]

their youth. I read the book last year, as in the House it is important to know one's enemy. It is a very good book, and I commend it, although there are some boring passages about socialist ideology. If Robert Tressell were alive today, I am sure that Alastair Campbell would give him a quick telephone call to say that he had never written the novel.

The hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) is in his place. He has read the novel, and approves of it. One character is called Jack Linden, formerly a fine worker but now old and unable to work. He is thrown out of employment and has no money, so he has to ask the local community for help. The book says that on a Wednesday the secretary of the Organized Benevolence Society called at the House, and on the Friday

"Jack received a letter from him to the effect that the case had been duly considered by the committee, who had come to the conclusion that as it was a 'chronic' case they were unable to deal with it, and advised him to apply to the Board of Guardians. This was what Linden had hitherto shrunk from doing"—

he was a pensioner of 67—

"but the situation was desperate. They owed five weeks' rent, and to crown their misfortune his eyesight had become so bad that even if there had been any prospect of obtaining work it was very doubtful if he could have managed to do it. So Linden, feeling utterly crushed and degraded, swallowed all that remained of his pride and went like a beaten dog to see the relieving officer, who took him before the Board, who did not think it a suitable case for out-relief, and after some preliminaries it was arranged that Linden and his wife were to go into the workhouse, and Mary"—

their daughter—

"was to be allowed three shillings a week to help her to support herself and the two children. As for Linden's sons, the Guardians intimated their intention of compelling them to contribute towards the cost of their parents' maintenance."

Those appalling conditions existed in this country at the beginning of the last century. I am not, of course, arguing that the Government are forcing anybody into a workhouse. We live in a prosperous society, in which people are helped through means-tested benefits. But many pensioners feel that they are being forced into a workhouse—they have paid their way all their life, yet when they retire at the age of 65, they find that they have to go cap in hand, just like Jack Linden, to ask for a means-tested benefit. That is simply not fair or right.

5.36 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate, because I represent a constituency where the gap between the needs of pensioners, and the support that they receive, is one of the widest. If any Opposition Member doubts the effects of 18 years of Tory slash and burn on our public services, I invite them to come with me to visit Bethnal Green, Whitechapel, Wapping, Bow or Stepney. Pensioners in those areas—which were, incidentally, bombed in the second world war—spend much of their time in my constituency surgeries telling me of the gap between their needs and the support that they receive.

Deprivation in Tower Hamlets is not confined to young families living in damp, overcrowded flats, with no one in work and little prospect of employment. In fact, I would say that social exclusion is felt most acutely by my elderly and vulnerable constituents who spent their whole lives working, looking forward to retiring with comfort and dignity. Of course, they do not have the opportunity, as younger constituents do, to benefit from the Government's new deal for the unemployed, although they benefit from many of the new measures that the Government have introduced, to which I shall come.

It remains the case, however, that many pensioners have no chance of enjoying a retirement in the comfort and dignity that they hoped for. We must be honest and recognise that, for many, retirement continues to be a daily struggle to make ends meet. There is certainly little left over at the end of each week to enjoy the things that many of us in the working population take for granted. I will never forget an elderly constituent who came to one of my first constituency surgeries and said, "I must speak with you, because my rent has gone up from £29.50 a week to £29.70." My maths is not great at the best of the times; however, it was obvious that this man had queued for four hours to tell me that his rent had gone up by 20p a week. Most of us in the Chamber might drop a 20p piece on the floor and continue walking—we certainly would not queue for four hours to speak to our Member of Parliament about losing that amount. So I hope that this debate will take into account the reality of many pensioners' lives.

We must also recognise that many pensioners sit at home in fear. They are afraid not just to go out because of crime, but to stay in their own homes because of crime, so often linked to drugs. They are afraid of becoming ill or disabled and of needing long-term care that they cannot afford.

The Government have taken essential and well-publicised steps to address the needs of pensioners through many measures. Those include the £100 increase in winter fuel allowance, the restoration of free eye tests, the introduction of free television licences for the over-75s, increased funding for the health service and for local authorities' social services departments and, most importantly, the introduction of the minimum income guarantee for pensioners.

I was going to discuss my concerns about the increased investment that we want over the next two years in the health service but, in the light of the Prime Minister's welcome commitment to increase health spending year on year until the proportion of our gross domestic product spent on health is in line with the proportions in other western countries, I will confine myself to the amount of money that pensioners have to live on.

I wholeheartedly welcome the introduction of the minimum income guarantee, which fulfils our manifesto commitment to help the poorest pensioners. I particularly welcome the commitment made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that the guarantee will rise in line with earnings, rather than inflation. Many hon. Members meet pensioners who do not realise that they are entitled to an income support top-up to bring them up to the amount of the minimum income guarantee. I pay tribute to Tower Hamlets Age Concern and other organisations that raise awareness of the guarantee and help to guide my constituents through the benefits maze to ensure that they receive their entitlements. I hope that all hon. Members will remind pensioners who come to see them that the minimum income guarantee can be claimed in writing or by

telephone. Complicated application forms often put pensioners off making claims, and I am certain that the Government's improvements will help.

Other pensioners, particularly the oldest, who remember the means tests of the 1930s, are often put off claiming minimum income guarantee because a stigma is attached to income support. I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Minister assure the House last week that the forthcoming Government-sponsored take-up campaign would include a partial rebranding of the guarantee to try to remove some of that stigma.

The challenge before us is to introduce measures that ensure that all pensioners share in the growing prosperity of the nation. However, despite the Government's best efforts, it is true, both in perception and in reality, that many pensioners are not sharing that prosperity. That is why I should like an increase greater than inflation in the basic state pension. Because of the panoply of measures that I have mentioned, it would be untrue to imply that the Government are giving pensioners only 75p extra, but it would be equally untrue to say that the country could not afford to pay pensioners more in basic state pension. The abolition of the link between basic state pension and average earnings and the later entrenchment of that decision were among the meanest and most disgraceful acts of the Thatcher and Major Governments. Restoring and backdating the link would carry an astronomical financial cost, which I shall turn to shortly.

Putting extra money into the basic state pension would not target those pensioners most in need, and, as with any universal benefit, some money would go to relatively rich pensioners. Stakeholder pensions and second state pensions will improve matters for many pensioners in future, particularly those who have been overlooked in the past, such as women and carers. I cannot help but point out that I am one of only two women Members in the Chamber at present. No woman Conservative Members—indeed, hardly any Tories at all—are here, and only one of the three women Liberal Democrats is present. It is quite obvious why women have been overlooked by the Department of Social Security and by almost every other Department: we are not present to make our voices heard. That is clearly shown in this Chamber today; I am sick to death of it.

Most pensioners in my constituency—both men and women—have never had an opportunity to contribute to occupational or private pension schemes. They paid their stamp throughout their whole working life in the expectation that they would receive a decent pension from the state. They deserve more than they are getting at present. They certainly deserve the £30 a week extra for single pensioners and the £30 to £45 a week extra for couples that they would receive if the earnings link were restored. However, that is pie in the sky in our current political situation. How much would it cost? My right hon. Friend the Minister mentioned a cost of £13 billion net. In response to questions, I have been reliably informed that it would mean 6p on basic income tax. Which politician, from any party, will stand up and say, "Six pence on income tax, vote for me"? No politician will say that. And which pensioner will expect their children to vote for it? We are all dishonest if we do not remain in the real world.

Despite that, I sincerely hope that Ministers might signal their good intentions by reviewing next year's inflation-linked increase, so that we accelerate the allocation of the share of the country's income that is directed at pensioners. It was right and proper that the Government's overall strategy was first to direct our efforts towards the poorest pensioners. I hope that we shall now turn our attention to those pensioners who do not qualify for the minimum income guarantee. Those people are not necessarily rich; indeed, many of them only just manage to keep their heads above water. It is unfair that those who have worked hard all their lives and have savings, or a small occupational pension, which take them just above income support, should end up being worse off because they do not receive other passported benefits, such as housing benefit or council tax benefit.

Although people with savings should be expected to make use of them in retirement, and should not live off only the interest, some pensioners who visit me do not accept that. We must realise that there is still a disincentive to save; we should do more to ensure that people with savings and occupational pensions do not lose out.

I am delighted that the Government have extended the new 10p income tax starting rate to savings. That will help pensioners with savings—as will next year's 22p standard rate. I was also delighted to note the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, in his pre-Budget statement, that the personal allowance for the elderly would be raised by £310 for those aged between 65 and 74 and by £380 for those aged 75 years and over. That increase has a phenomenal meaning. No pensioner aged between 65 and 74, who has an income of £110 or less a week, will pay income tax. When I say "phenomenal", I mean that, as a result of the measures, few pensioners in Tower Hamlets, for example, will pay income tax on any of their income. Many pensioners will surely be grateful to the Government for that.

I remind anyone who genuinely cares about getting a better deal for pensioners that only this Labour Government are delivering that. Only this Labour Government will deliver an even better deal in the future. As we know, if they had to, the Tories would sell the clothes off their grandmother. As for the Liberals, they are always talking about putting 1p on income tax. *[Interruption.]* Liberal Members have no doubt changed their policy on that as well, judging by their remarks. That 1p on income tax would raise approximately £2 billion. Let us suppose that the Liberals were going to direct half of that—£1 billion—to pensioners. By the end of this Parliament, Labour will have spent £4 billion extra on pensioners. If people examine the facts, they will recognise that only Labour has both the moral commitment and the financial ability to meet pensioners' needs.

I hope that the Government will do more. I hope that they will direct more money towards pensioners. But let us remember that the Labour Government are doing more to meet the needs of pensioners than the Tories or Liberals could ever hope to offer.

5.50 pm

Mr. Ronnie Fearn (Southport): I speak for the town—Southport—that has the second-highest proportion of pensioners in Great Britain. We are beaten only by Bournemouth.

A fortnight ago, I spoke to a meeting of 200 pensioners. Beforehand, I had sent out a little memo which said, "If you have a particular gripe, bring it to the meeting."

[Mr. Ronnie Fearn]

Of course, the insult of the 75p pension increase was high on the agenda; everyone spoke about that. However, when they spoke, pensioners were also looking at the other part of the chitty that I had sent, which asked how much the price of their average basket of groceries, bought from a supermarket or small store, had increased in the past three years. The answer that came back—people had not got together to discuss the subject—was, between £2 and £2.50. They compared that with the mere 75p increase that the Government have graciously allowed them, which pensioners say is not enough.

I do not meet pensioners at the post office, but I knock on doors, as we all do. Recently, I have had to knock on 500 doors because there is to be a by-election in Ainsdale ward. I have also knocked on doors in my ward, because I am still a member of the local authority, Sefton. When asked, "Have you anything to say to a politician?" most people go quiet and do not say much. This time, though, people were very vociferous on two issues. The minor issue was the lack of sports facilities for young people in Southport, but people were also asking, "Why is this insult of 75p being thrust upon us, as pensioners?" That was the major issue.

I mentioned to people that we had opposed the provision. I said that we would also express our opposition to it today, in the motion, and people were grateful for that; but, in the end, it is the Government who decide. We have said that we shall make our case forcefully, but the Government must decide whether the 75p increase is enough.

I happened to be in the House in 1988, when I was speaking on health for my party, and a disastrous vote took place. The Conservatives wanted to introduce charges for eye testing and dental charges, and we, with the Labour Opposition, voted against the provision. It was passed by only six votes, much to the regret of myself, the country and pensioners. Some pensioners over the age of 80 and various others on benefit did not need to pay that charge, but the majority of pensioners did have to pay, so they were delighted when we voted, with the new Labour Government, to remove the charge. That pleasure has been completely destroyed by the increase of only 75p.

At the recent meeting, the pensioners acknowledged that eye tests were now free but asked me, "Have you seen the cost of spectacles?" They were paying an average of between £50 and £90 for spectacles or lenses. That cost has been increasing. Although their eye test is free, that saving has not counterbalanced the increased charges.

In my constituency, Mersea Travel led the way—with Sheffield—in granting a free pensioners travel pass. That pass is still available and there are no complaints but, when I speak to groups elsewhere, a very strong case is made that travel is not free. The concessionary pass does not exist; tokens are available, which pay for only part of the journey. We may be lucky in my part of Southport, but throughout rural areas, for instance, the pensioners pass has not yet reached the standard set by the two authorities that first offered the free pass.

Travel benefits pensioners. Pensioners who can get out and travel around keep fitter, saving the NHS money. Therefore, the pensioners pass is essential. I hope that the Government will take a broad perspective, and remember those people who are not capable of moving beyond their home.

Another group of poor pensioners is emerging very strongly in my constituency and in many other seaside resorts. That group consists of pensioners who were left as widows by husbands who thought that they had left them well-off in dividends, shares, and money in building societies. All those pensioners have seen their income shrivel over the past few years—not two years, but the past few years—so much so that, now, the majority of visitors to my surgery, and to the citizens advice bureau in Southport, have debts incurred because of property repairs.

Last week, a widow—quite well-to-do, I supposed—visited my surgery and said that she was desperate. Her income had shrivelled so much that, although the roof was going, she had no money with which to repair it. These, the new poor, are arriving very sharply in this country. Anyone who speaks to the CAB or visits any Member's surgery will find that that is so.

If the pensioner has been connected, or the husband was connected, with the forces, they can be advised—as I advise them—to go to the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmens Families Association, which is very good indeed, or to the Army, Navy and Air Force benevolent funds. However, only part of the cost of repairs can be paid by that organisation or organisations, and it is a means-tested affair. The forces are doing their bit for the pensioners—they are elderly pensioners now—but we should not have to rely on benevolent funds to ensure that pensioners get an adequate living.

The standard spending assessment is not what local authorities expected, so every authority is struggling to make ends meet. They now find that increases have not kept pace with inflation and that unexpected matters arise which require purchase and expense. Costs of care are increasing. Those costs include the cost of home help. At the moment, that service is drifting into private enterprise. About 30, 40, 50 and, in some cases, 70 per cent. of that care help has been privatised and, because of privatisation, costs are increasing.

Dr. Brand: Has my hon. Friend come across one of the consequences of privatising home care? Many pensioners now have to pay VAT on the services that they receive at home. Is it not disgraceful that the Government penalise pensioners twice?

Mr. Fearn: I agree with my hon. Friend. Such cases have been brought to my surgery and to the citizens advice bureau, which actually passes its cases on to me when it cannot find an answer.

Mr. Berry: I thought that it was the other way round.

Mr. Fearn: We do both. However, I write to Ministers and Government officials and receive answers that are not always terribly helpful. They sometimes are, but from the point of view of giving, their response is normally parsimonious.

Some people say that they are tired of pensioners saying, "I fought for my country and now look at how I am being treated with an increase of only 75p in my pension." However, I admire the pensioners who say that. They have done their service for the country not only when they fought, but as members of this great country's work force. They are being kicked in the teeth as regards pensions.

When the Minister replies, will he clarify the position of the minimum income guarantee for older women? We certainly know that they make up one category that does not collect what it is due. That is not because such women are too proud to claim, but because the benefit is not that well known. What briefing and encouragement will the Minister give to induce them to apply for the benefit?

6.2 pm

Mr. John Grogan (Selby): I shall confine my brief remarks to four matters of particular relevance to pensioners. I will follow many hon. Members in discussing concessionary television licences; I will follow the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) in considering concessionary bus passes; and I will follow the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) in considering the take-up of income support by pensioners, and the minimum income guarantee. I will quote the same Government research document as did the hon. Member for Gainsborough, but I cannot promise to quote from "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists". It must be the first time in the long history of Parliament that that book has been quoted by a Conservative Member.

I preface my remarks by pointing out that in my constituency, as in many others, retired and older people play a key role in maintaining many voluntary organisations, church organisations, much of local government and many political parties. I observed the Conservative party conference, and it seems that retired people play a disproportionate role in maintaining the major Opposition party. Nevertheless, their enthusiasm, energy and experience keep many community organisations going.

My father was 75 on 12 November last year. He is lucky enough to receive a teacher's pension. Three days before he was 75, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that, from this year, all 75-year-olds would get a free television licence. At last, my dad has to admit that I must be a man of some influence to arrange that three days before his birthday. Seriously, however, there is no issue that causes greater argument among pensioners and between pensioners and politicians than the operation of the current concessionary television licence scheme, which applies to some forms of sheltered housing.

The Davies committee that considered the funding of the BBC concluded that the current concession generally goes to poorer pensioners and that those that receive it are more likely to be single pensioners. Therefore, there is a rough and ready distributional justification for the scheme. However, the logic of giving extremely welcome free television licences to those over 75 will, and should, ultimately be extended to all pensioners. It costs £300 million to give free licences to those over 75, and it would cost a further £400 million to give it to all pensioners, as is the case in Ireland. I hope that, in time, we shall do that.

Even though one-off payments, such as winter fuel payments and free television licences, are often criticised, they benefit all pensioners. They benefit pensioners who claim income support and do not benefit from pension increases, and they benefit pensioners who are entitled to income support and do not claim it. In time, the free licence scheme should be extended to all pensioners.

If there is one subject that causes more debate among pensioners than the concessionary television licence, it is concessionary bus passes. That is particularly true in border areas between two concessionary fare regimes. My constituency is in such a border area. The hon. Member for Southport referred to bus tokens; in Tadcaster, pensioners receive £8 worth of bus tokens a year. A return journey to Leeds costs £3.50, so pensioners can make two journeys into Leeds and have £1 of tokens left. When the half-fare bus pass is introduced for pensioners in Tadcaster next year, a couple going into Leeds once a week could make a big saving of £180 a year.

However, there are several issues that the Government must consider. In particular, they must consider reciprocal arrangements between different authorities and the mutual recognition of bus passes. In some areas, such recognition takes place and is usually co-ordinated by the county council. For example, in Sussex and Devon, a bus pass from one district will enable a pensioner to receive concessions in any other district in those counties.

West Yorkshire passenger transport authority gives mutual recognition to the concessions given to pensioners in Manchester. Therefore, if pensioners with a West Yorkshire bus pass travel to Greater Manchester, they can receive the concessions that are available there. If West Yorkshire passenger transport authority gives concessions to Lancastrians—albeit pensioners—the very least that should happen is that, once other councils in Yorkshire start to introduce such schemes, there should be mutual recognition across the county; otherwise, what will happen to pensioners from Tadcaster who go to Leeds and catch a bus to St. James's hospital to visit relatives or one to an out-of-town leisure centre so that they can go for a swim or play bowls? Are we suggesting that they should not receive the 20p concession that is available to pensioners in the West Yorkshire area and that they should have to pay the full fare for the second journey? Details of such schemes need scrutinising.

On pensioners' take-up of income support, I refer, as I said I would, to the research published by the Government in October and to the press releases that came out in December. This valuable research was based in nine different areas and the December press release says that its aim was

"to examine the most effective and cost efficient ways of identifying pensioners who were entitled to IS but were not claiming . . . and, having identified them, to examine the most effective and efficient ways of encouraging them to claim."

Roughly 9,000 pilot schemes were run in the nine areas, and four ways were used to get in touch with pensioners. They were:

"telephone; visit; postal (long form), and postal (short screening form)."

As was said earlier, the most effective way of contacting pensioners to encourage them to take up benefit was to send them the long form and an accompanying letter.

It is worth while considering the detail of the research to show the type of problems with which the Government have to deal. It points out that 32 per cent. of the pilot cases contacted by the Benefits Agency did not respond to an intervention, as it is described in the document, and that 15 per cent. said that they did not want to make a claim. Therefore, almost 50 per cent. of the pilot cases were lost at that stage. Indeed, only 5 per cent. of the pilot cases ultimately resulted in a successful claim for income support.

What lessons can we learn from the research? Possibly, we can learn that it is difficult for the Benefits Agency to be the most effective mechanism for take-up campaigns.

[Mr. John Grogan]

Its job is to process efficiently and calculate benefit claims. Problems of stigma, for example, are particularly difficult for the Benefits Agency to overcome. Other lessons that we can learn are identified in the Government's press release. It states that the

"main barriers to claiming are attitudes about being an Income Support claimant and its perceived stigma"

and

"the physical process of making a claim".

It continues:

"More specifically, these involve pensioners misunderstanding the criteria for entitlement; the complexity of the application form . . . the need to reveal financial details; the terminology used, eg benefit, support."

I look forward to the Government's forthcoming announcement about how to encourage take-up among pensioners. Will that be by simplifying the form, or reinforcing the notion of entitlement, which is referred to in the Government's press release, and getting endorsement from authority figures? I do not know whether that will be Victor Meldrew. However, such moves will be welcome.

The real solution is buried away in the press release, where it is referred to as an option. It is the option of

"making Income Support an automatic payment without a need to claim".

That was certainly envisaged by the Commission on Social Justice, which was set up by the late John Smith. The commission was probably the first body to popularise the idea of a minimum income guarantee for pensioners. It certainly envisaged ultimately that in making a claim for a state pension, pensioners would be asked at that stage what other income from pensions they received. If that did not add up to the minimum pension guarantee, they would automatically receive that payment. That is the only sure-fire way of ensuring that all pensioners who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee are paid it.

Buried away in the research document is a sentence that I shall bring to the attention of the House. It states:

"Populous urban areas with the highest levels of deprivation and income support receipt had more extensive provision of advice and advocacy services. More rural areas (with the exception of York) had poor provision of information and advice. Assessing the overall impact of welfare rights activity was difficult. Little robust, systematic evaluation of take-up activity was found in the areas."

I suggest that pensioners, especially those in rural areas such as North Yorkshire, suffer a double whammy in terms of the benefits that should be available to them. First, advice centres are not nearly comprehensive enough in rural areas, although I accept that some of the advice services are very good, as they are in North Yorkshire. As a result, take-up levels for income support in rural areas, including attendance allowance and disability living allowance, are much lower than in urban areas. It reinforces the so-called stigma that attaches to them if fewer people claim them.

Secondly, local authorities, which depend for their funding, as North Yorkshire county council does—and particularly its social services departments—on the number of claimants, among pensioners, of income support, attendance allowance and disability living allowance, lose out through lack of grants. In terms of the provision of home helps and meals on wheels services, many people in rural areas suffer.

The North Yorkshire county council Labour group, although in a minority, has undertaken some research on these matters. It has found that only 11.1 per cent. of pensioners in North Yorkshire claim successfully for attendance allowance and disability living allowance, which are non-means-tested benefits. The England average is 14.5 per cent. The average among county councils is 13.3 per cent. Even though the group is a minority, it has successfully persuaded the county council to give corporate priority this year to the improvement of welfare benefits advice. I leave the House with the thought that central and local government have a key role in ensuring that pensioners receive the benefits to which they are entitled.

6.14 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): The impact of the current virus is such that my speech will be delivered in perhaps softer tones than would be customary. None the less, I hope that it will contribute something to the debate. It is a pleasure to be able to take up the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan), who made several interesting proposals and suggestions—not least the need for joined-up government across the Pennines on transport policy.

When I read the motion I was disappointed with its scope. When I first saw the subject for the debate—meeting the needs of pensioners—I thought that we would have a much more wide-ranging debate than one that focused narrowly on the 75p increase in the state retirement pension. However, the state retirement pension is clearly important. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State reminded the House earlier that the state pension remains the bedrock of Government pensions policy.

Government policies for Britain's 11 million pensioners must be as wide-ranging as their different needs and characteristics demand. Our 11 million pensioners are not a homogeneous group; they are very different people.

It must be acknowledged that many pensioners now are better off than could have been dreamed of 30 or 40 years ago. Before coming to the Chamber, I opened the latest report on households below average incomes. I knew that the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) was to propose the motion and that he is something of an expert on this series of reports, which he demonstrated this afternoon.

The tables in the report tell us a great deal about the poorer members of our society. They tell us also a thing or two about some of the richer members of it. For example, 5 million of our 11 million pensioners are members of the richest 60 per cent. of the population, and 1 million are members of the richest 20 per cent. Most of us know from our family and friends and our own experience that that is the case.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby brought as evidence the position of his father, and I do the same. My father is 70 and he is not one of the super rich, but, like my hon. Friend's father, he was a teacher. He has an occupational pension and lives a quite comfortable life. During this interesting debate on the state retirement pension, my father has been sunning himself in Tenerife, along with thousands of other pensioners in Britain who take themselves abroad at this time of year for some warmer weather.

I do not make that point to belittle the plight of pensioners who still face poverty. It is a scandal that so many pensioners still do face poverty. I make the point to

put the pensioner question into context. The rich-and-poor divide that scars our society affects pensioners as well as people in all other sections of society. I believe that different policies are required for these different groups to deal, first, with the immediate pressures that come with poverty and, secondly, and just as important—more important in the long term—to deal with the factors that cause poverty in our society in the long run.

Against that background, I believe that the Government's approach is absolutely right. The measures that will help today's pensioners—the minimum income guarantee, the winter fuel allowance, free eye tests, free television licences for the over-75s and all the other measures that were welcomed by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) with, as he said, admirable assistance from the Liberal Democrat councillors on his local authority—mean that the poorest pensioners in Britain are now £10 a week better off if single, and £16 in the case of a pensioner couple.

The second crucial piece of Government policy is the action that we are taking to prevent poverty in future generations of pensioners. We are dealing with the causes, not just the symptoms. The Government are introducing the state second pension and the framework for stakeholder pensions so that we can avoid poverty in future.

Pensioner poverty is a huge problem and no one should underestimate that fact. The statistics on households below average income tell us that, between 1991 and 1997, a quarter of all single pensioners lived in poverty, not just for one of those years but for all six. They were trapped in poverty, with no prospect of an escape route. That has a severe impact on the life and quality of life of those pensioners.

Nowhere is that seen more graphically than in terms of health and life expectancy. In Manchester, a typical man who is reaching the age of 65 can expect to live until he is 78—a further 13 years. However, he will spend only about seven of those years in good health. In Surrey today, a typical man reaching 65 years of age can expect to live until he is 80—a further 15 years—and enjoy 10 of them in good health.

We must first accept that there are people in poverty who live in Surrey, just as there are reasonably well-off people who live in Manchester. The example brings two important points to our attention. First, people in better-off areas enjoy longer life and can expect healthier life, too. Secondly, pensioners in poorer areas need extra support from public services. The man from Manchester will die earlier but will require an extra year of support from the national health service, the local authority, the voluntary sector and so on. Pensioner poverty is about much more than 75p a week; it is about lifetime chances and public services, as well as income.

I have been to many pensioner meetings, as have my hon. Friends and some Opposition Members. I am in no doubt that, if the Government were to increase the state retirement pension in line with earnings rather than prices, it would be extremely popular with a number of pensioner organisations and groups, not least those in my constituency. However, I do not favour that approach because I do not believe that it would help us tackle the problem of pensioner poverty now.

We have heard several examples of the sums involved if the state retirement pension were increased—I think £13 billion was the figure given for an increase of £30 a week. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) generously proposed an increase of £1 a week. An increase in the state retirement pension of £5 a week would mean, first, extra Government expenditure of £2.5 billion a year, which would of course be built on year on year, and secondly, a boost to the incomes of better-off people. The one group that such an increase would not benefit would be the poorest pensioners, who would lose every pound of that £5 in withdrawal of means-tested benefits. They would see the advantage taken away from them.

There have been some interesting contributions to the debate on the issue of means testing—not least from the hon. Member for Gainsborough who follows the social security debate, and especially means testing, assiduously—but I grow impatient over it. The Government are often accused by their critics of taking measures that increase it.

If the Government are to help the least well-off people, and if we leave aside, for the time being anyway, the fact that their long-term aim is to implement measures such as the state second pension and stakeholder pensions, to give carers, the low paid and people with disabilities the chance of a second pension that would take them above the poverty line in the long term, we must recognise that there has to be some measure of income and resources.

No party or Government can run away from that fact. We may hear much rhetoric on the issue, but no other party has made a firm proposal to abolish means testing as part of their overall strategy. All parties have a responsibility to help to develop a different approach to the testing of income and resources—to try to foster a new mindset among the public.

When means testing was operating in the 19th century and then in the 1930s, most people were poor, and the process was demeaning and stigmatising. However, times have changed; most people today are not poor. Together we should be able to create a new attitude to the testing of income and resources that reduces the stigmatisation process.

Three measures could be helpful. First, the branding of the minimum income guarantee as a guarantee—an entitlement—is very helpful. It begins to get us away from the handout mentality. Secondly, it is extremely helpful that the year-on-year increase is in line with earnings rather than prices. Its value will therefore increase year on year.

Many people do not claim means-tested benefits because they are of only marginal advantage. A lady came to my advice bureau the other day—not about pensions but in relation to another benefit—who had in the past claimed family credit and been only marginally better off. In the end, she had given up claiming. A few years went by; we introduced the working families tax credit, she made a new claim and now finds herself £70 a week better off. As people see a substantial difference by virtue of making a claim—it is worth their while—they will be more likely to claim. More pensioners will claim benefits as the minimum income guarantee increases.

The third reason for optimism is that anybody who retires from 2010 will have no memory of times before the second world war. Perhaps the images of the 1930s and further back will therefore dim in the public's minds. We must be honest: no party will get rid of the means test. It is a necessary test of income and resources, and we need a more positive attitude towards it.

[Mr. Paul Goggins]

I said that I was somewhat disappointed by the narrow nature of the motion. I certainly hope that we have other opportunities in the near future to debate other issues that affect pensioners. I was very pleased that the hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) introduced the issue of housing as it affects pensioners, because it is extremely important.

In the Manchester part of my constituency, two thirds of pensioners live in rented accommodation—much of it local authority owned, some of it housing association property, and some private. Many of those pensioners are unhappy with the house in which they live. Some have medical problems and need adaptations to their houses, which take for ever to be made. If they need alternative accommodation, what is available is often unsuitable for their needs. Some have family living outside the area, but transferring to suitable accommodation can be difficult. Sometimes, their houses are too big, but often smaller and more suitable accommodation is not available. Pensioners' housing need is an issue that we must all address.

One extremely important issue that has not been raised in this debate is the fact that 300,000 pensioners in Britain do not have access to a telephone. That is not necessarily a matter for the Government; it is one for telephone companies. Last week, a gas company announced that it would be abolishing the standing charge and restructuring its charging system to take account of that. If a gas company can do that, surely telephone companies can do something to connect the 300,000 pensioners who are isolated. It is great that pensioners are using the internet, but not if 300,000 of them cannot pick up a telephone to call for help when they need it.

I was glad to hear my right hon. Friend the Minister of State promise that the issue of capital limits will be dealt with in this Parliament. That is so important. It is 12 years since the limits vere set, but they have never been changed. Much can be done to help the poorest pensioners as and when the limits are altered.

Complaints about the 75p increase in the state retirement pension pale into insignificance when compared with what the Government are doing for pensioners generally and for poorer pensioners in particular.

6.28 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I apologise to the one or two hon. Members who have been unable to speak in this debate.

This has been a very useful debate. Liberal Democrats make no apologies for focusing on the derisory 75p increase in the basic state pension which is to come into effect in April. All I want to do is to seek clarity on the stance of the official Opposition and of the many Labour Members who signed the early-day motion to which my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) referred.

I shall try to address a few of the points made in the debate, starting with the comments of the hon. Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry), who rightly said that the supposed demographic time bomb is a myth. The royal commission on long-term care and, indeed, the Select Committee on Health, have comprehensively scotched that argument. If there was a time-bomb at all, it went off in the 20th century, and we managed to afford the costs of it. It is important to bear in mind the fact that we not only afforded a massive increase in the number of pensioners but were able to put in additional resources to improve the basic state pension. We should not forget that fact, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Northavon drew our attention.

The Minister referred in his opening remarks to the fact that we had changed our policy since the general election in respect of our manifesto commitment on the uprating of the basic state pension. That is true. It is fine and appropriate to consider policies and to keep them under review. It is a strange proposition that at no point should a party re-evaluate its position. The position that we have outlined sets us clearly apart from the other parties on the issue of pensioners and how to improve their circumstances.

We have made it clear that we want a new £3 age addition to the basic state pension at 75, and we want to build on and increase to £5 the miserly 25p age addition at 80. Those are the first steps in improving the lot of the poorest of our pensioners.

We should consider how to index the basic state pension to the basket of costs that pensioners face in reality. The hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) and others referred to the costs that are not properly factored into the calculation of the retail prices index, which is the current basis for uprating.

The Minister spent quite some time talking about averages. He talked a lot less about the poorest of our pensioners. As we have established in this debate, although it is undoubtedly true that average pensioner incomes have increased, the figures ignore the situation of the long-term retired, whose incomes have declined because all too often they are uprated in relation to prices rather than earnings—whether occupational pensions or the basic state pension. Inflation has eroded the value of pensions, and has left pensioners in an increasingly difficult and hard-pressed situation.

Where do the Conservatives stand? Very few of them stood in this debate. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where are they?"] They obviously had engagements elsewhere. Perhaps they were consulting pensioner constituents to find out their views. In a speech lasting 14 minutes, their spokeswoman, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait), did not elucidate their policy or give the official Opposition's view of whether the basic state pension uprating this April is adequate. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) was right to pose that question, but the Conservatives did not answer it. They do not seem to want to say what their policy is.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) rightly made the link between health equalities and the level of pensions. That was drawn out by the Government's own report—the Acheson report—in September 1988, which made it clear that there is a definite link between low incomes and poor health outcomes, to which several hon. Members referred.

The proposition that we have put to the House tonight is that the 75p increase in the basic state pension is derisory. It will do nothing to meet the real costs of living with which pensioners are confronted every day. For most

pensioners, the pension increase will be consumed by, for example, the council tax increase. The poorest pensioners will be hit the hardest. Indeed, 870,000 people who are entitled to claim the so-called minimum income guarantee do not claim it. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) referred to the Government's research on take-up. A factor that he did not mention, which I think is highly relevant, is that 36 per cent. of the people who responded to the Government's research said that they would not claim the benefit: they would refuse to take up a means-tested benefit and would thus continue to live in poverty. The Government must consider that seriously. It is right that we urge people to take up the minimum income guarantee, and I hope that the campaign that the Government are about to launch is a success.

Another 600,000 people are disqualified from the minimum income guarantee because they have savings of £8,000 or more. My hon. Friend the Member for Southport rightly talked about this new category of poor pensioners who live in properties which their income is no longer sufficient to maintain. That is a serious challenge for all hon. Members to think about: there is now no reward for thrift. The Government made matters worse when they decided to abolish the tax credit on dividends, as a result of which many pensioners lose £75 per annum.

The largest group of pensioners who are missing out on the income guarantee are older women who, as a result of broken contribution records, often do not receive full basic state pensions. Currently, 1.5 million pensioners need income support. In the Green Paper that the Government published last year, they said:

"People who work all their lives should not have to rely on means tested benefits."

On the Government's own figures, at least another 1 million people will require means-tested income support by 2050.

For some 1.4 million people, the minimum income guarantee will make no difference—those 600,000 who are disqualified because of the capital thresholds and those who have not claimed the benefit. That means that the minimum income guarantee is no guarantee at all.

All the evidence shows that the poorest pensioners are the oldest pensioners. For example, by the Government's own definition, 80 per cent. of the over-80s live in fuel poverty. We want far more money to be put into the basic state pension. A more effective way of targeting money would be to target it on the basis not of means but of age. That is why we believe that the extra 25p that is added to the basic state pension at the age of 80, which has not been uprated since 1971, should be raised for the first time for many years to at least £5, and that there should be an age addition at the age of 75 of at least £3.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) referred to the proposal for 1p on income tax for education on which my party has campaigned. She was the first person in the debate to mention that, but to listen to her, one would have thought that it had been the substance of many speeches by Liberal Democrats. It is not our policy to use the 1p on income tax for education to fund pensions.

The hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) questioned us about our proposal to use the surplus on the national insurance fund. My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon outlined in some detail how that would work, but I shall recap. Currently, there is an accumulated balance on the national insurance fund of £15 billion. Every year, £1 billion is added to that surplus. Our proposals for age additions would cost about £0.5 billion per annum—modest increases targeted to help those most in need. That is the difference between our approach and the Government's.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow was right to say that the country could afford to do more for pensioners through the basic state pension. That applies to the current generation of pensioners, but how will future pensioners fare? The Government's solution is to scrap the state earnings-related pension and put in its place the state second pension. The first full state second pension will not be paid until 2047. Eighteen-year-olds might have some hope that a state second pension will come to their aid when they retire, but only once they have been in the work force for 40 years, and only if they pass the relevant qualifying tests for credits.

The Government are introducing the state second pension at such a slow rate that it makes snails look positively fast. By 2025, the state second pension will put in people's pockets an extra £1.30 a week. After 40 years in the work force, will the state second pension lift its beneficiaries out of the means test, which is what the Green Paper said it should do? The answer is no. The minimum income guarantee will very quickly overtake the combined sum of the basic state pension and the state second pension.

The Government's amendment refers to people retiring on incomes above means-tested levels "in due course." That is a never-never land promise—it will never be redeemed by this or any Government. It prompts the question, when will the state second pension lift people above means-test levels? As it is currently framed in the legislation, it will not.

Liberal Democrats believe that the 75p increase in the basic state pension from this April is a disgrace, derisory and an insult to the pensioners of this country. That is why tonight we shall go through the Lobby to vote for our motion, and we hope that other Members who feel the same way will do so as well.

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): The hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) gave a passable impression of a "desiccated calculating machine" as he bombarded us with statistics and with facts and figures. It was just the kind of passionate, almost addictive, number crunching that Nye Bevan would have held in disdain.

I have no doubt that the hon. Gentleman is well informed. The problem with his argument is its assumption that other people, both in the House and outside, are less well informed than he is. His argument demands total credulity: it asks us to believe every word that he says now. It also demands collective amnesia: it asks us to forget everything that the Liberal Democrats have said before.

The motion states that uprating the basic state pension in line with the retail prices index is inadequate, yet, as my right hon. Friend the Minister of State said earlier, just over two years ago the Liberal Democrat election manifesto said:

"The basic state pension will remain indexed to prices."

[Mr. Hugh Bayley]

Moreover, the Liberal Democrats gave a perfect description—in glowing terms—of the minimum income guarantee that the Labour Government have introduced. They said that they would

"Guarantee everyone an acceptable minimum standard of living in retirement. We will create an additional top-up pension for pensioners below the Income Support level. This will be indexed to earnings".

As most hon. Members know, the Liberal Democrats made those promises in a manifesto which—despite the ability of some of them to play with figures—displayed their inability to do basic sums. It contained spending pledges that would have cost some 5p in the pound in additional income tax, or some £600 per family. The Liberal Democrats promised to raise revenue, and to fund their pledges across the broad spectrum of Government expenditure, by putting 1p on income tax—should it prove necessary: they did not even give a guarantee that they would do that. We have heard confirmation this evening that not a scrap of the money raised from that 1p would go to pensioners. Every bit would support the Liberal Democrats' education plans—plans, incidentally, which have been funded to a far greater extent by this Labour Government.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): My hon. Friend will have heard the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) suggest earlier that Governments since the war had done more than link pensions to earnings. He may wish to stress that the present Government have done much more than that: indeed, the earnings link in itself may have been the easy option. Has he the shadow of a suspicion that, had this Government simply linked the basic pension to earnings, we would today be debating an Opposition motion demanding that we introduce a minimum income guarantee and increase it in line with prices?

Mr. Bayley: My hon. Friend is well versed in these matters, and he is absolutely right. Had we restored the link with earnings, the increase in spending on pensioners from the social security budget would have been less than it will be in the lifetime of this Parliament. By the end of the current Parliament, this Labour Government will be spending some £4 billion more per year on pensioners.

As my hon. Friend suggests, had we restored the earnings link—as the Liberal Democrats now imply that we should have—there would have been the same cost inflation. That is what Liberal Democrat policies would have brought about. The problem is that the Liberal Democrats produced a manifesto in which their sums did not add up, and they have now added yet more expenditure by promising more to pensioners, without explaining how—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Hon. Members must not shout at each other across the Floor.

Mr. Bayley: If the Liberal Democrats wish to increase expenditure, they owe it to the public, and to pensioners in particular, to explain how they are going to do that.

Pensioners are bright. They are too bright to be taken in easily by a bit of flexible arithmetic. During the last Parliament, I went to a public meeting to talk to the York pensioners association, which I had established. It was one of the first things that I did after being elected. I went to the meeting days after the Labour party had decided, in policy terms, to opt for targeting rather than raising the basic state pension in line with earnings—which had been our policy hitherto, as hon. Members know.

To be blunt, I expected a pretty rough ride. After I had said my piece, a woman pensioner stood up and said, "I am glad you said that, Mr. Bayley. When the Labour party promised the earth, I rather wondered where they would find the money." When a party makes promises without explaining how they will be funded, it has no credibility.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) did not argue that the Government should restore the link between the basic state pension and earnings, but he did argue that they should do more than provide price indexation for pensioners as a whole. Similar points were made by my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King).

All my hon. Friends recognise that the Government are doing substantially more for the poorest pensioners through the minimum income guarantee, but we are also doing more than simple price indexation for all pensioners. We are doing more by means of services such as eye tests, and the concessionary fares proposal that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will introduce in legislation during the current Session; but we are also doing more by introducing, for instance, the winter fuel supplement, which applied to all pensioners.

Initially, the winter fuel supplement was to be higher for pensioners on low incomes. It was to be £50 for pensioners receiving income support, and £20 for other pensioner households. However, partly in response to arguments such as those advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood—for instance, the argument that all pensioners should receive increases that are more than merely price indexed—this year we were able to announce a fivefold increase in the value of the winter fuel addition to £100. That is nearly £2 per week, in addition to the 75p. It is entirely wrong to suggest that the Government are leaving all pensioners with a mere 75p; we are providing additions for all pensioners on top of that.

I know, and every member of the Government knows, that many pensioners want us to do more. Many want us to restore the link. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) pointed out, if it were just a matter of spending, it could be said that the Government had done more than meet the cost of restoring the link. An extra £800 million has been added to social security expenditure on pensioners as a result of the introduction of the winter fuel addition and the minimum income guarantee for pensioners—£800 million more than would have been the cost of uprating pensions in relation to earnings over the three years during which we have been in government so far.

Of course, the Government have a choice. If we deemed it right, we could spend the money on an equal increase in the basic state pension for all pensioners; alternatively, we could target more on the pensioners who need help most.

The Government are serious about reducing poverty. When we published our first poverty report in September, many people, including most of the commentators in the newspapers, were taken aback at the boldness of our commitments and at the transparency of the indicators that we intend to use to monitor our success in reducing poverty. We put ourselves on the line and for a simple reason: we are committed to reducing poverty. If we are going to meet those ambitious goals, we will have to ensure that we target resources on those who need them most: the poor.

Think of the Government's inheritance when they came to office just over two and a half years ago. Pensioner incomes increased significantly between 1979 and 1997, a point that was made by hon. Members from the official Opposition. Indeed, over that period, average pensioner income rose faster than average earnings, yet, at the same time, the gap between the incomes of the poorest pensioners and other pensioners increased dramatically. Our priority is to direct more help to those who have been hardest hit through the 18 years of Conservative pension policy.

Mr. Webb: The Minister refers to those who have been hardest hit. Presumably, the small saver would come into that category. Will he explain why the Government have for three years retained the Tory capital limits—they have frozen them each year? He has promised action by the end of the Parliament. Why do pensioners have to wait that long? A year ago, the Government promised action soon. Why are we having to wait?

Mr. Bayley: The Government have promised to address capital limits. We will do so during the lifetime of the Parliament. The Liberal Democrats, who promise the earth without taxation commitments to pay for their promises, ask for yet another promise. Each year—pensioners understand the policy—the Government have introduced benefits for pensioners over and above price indexation. Each year, we have done things that have reduced the costs that pensioners face and that have increased pensioner incomes. The hon. Member for Northavon is wrong to shake his head because we have reduced the fuel costs that pensioners face; we have provided fuel supplements for all pensioners. During the lifetime of the current Parliament, we will continue to do that year by year. We have made an absolutely fundamental commitment—which, incidentally, the Liberal Democrats did not make—to deal with capital limits during the lifetime of the Parliament. That we will do.

If we increased the basic state pension in line with earnings, every pensioner would gain, except those on income support. Those on income support would lose every pound of the pension rise from their income support payment—from the minimum income guarantee. Instead, by targeting that money on the minimum income guarantee, we are helping the poorest pensioners substantially.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood also raised the capital limits issue. He did so to explain why he put his name to the early-day motion that has been discussed by quite a number of hon. Members on both sides of the House. I hope that my hon. Friend will be reassured by the commitment that the Government have given to address the issue. We are looking at the issue now and we will address it during the current Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) made a lot of important and useful points about the importance of a take-up campaign to ensure that pensioners who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee take it up, but he made one suggestion that I should like to discuss a bit further: that perhaps the take-up campaign should be run by any organisation other than the Benefits Agency because it was a tarnished commodity and would put people off claiming.

My hon. Friend is aware that we have changed the law to enable organisations other than the Benefits Agency to take information and to process a minimum income guarantee application. If someone is applying for housing benefit, for example, that other organisation could take information from the local authority. That is a welcome step forward, but I counsel against writing the Benefits Agency out of the equation. One of the problems with the Benefits Agency that we inherited was that it was simply a passive payer of benefits, rather than an active part of the welfare system. We need to ensure that the image of the Benefits Agency changes and that it is involved with a wide range of other agencies in spearheading the campaign.

The hon. Member for Southport (Mr. Fearn) made the point that additional help is needed for older pensioners. He asked whether the minimum income guarantee should be changed to achieve that. The minimum income guarantee already provides higher rates of guaranteed minimum income for older pensioners. As most hon. Members will know, for a single pensioner, the minimum income guarantee guarantees an income of £75 a week at current rates, but for a single person aged over 75, the rate is £95.60 a week. For a single person aged over 80, it is £101.30.

Mr. Fearn: I asked the Minister to come forward with priorities, so that the 37 per cent. of older women who are not claiming at the moment do claim.

Mr. Bayley: The Liberal Democrats have a simple choice. Either they put whatever resources are available in the hands of all older pensioners, in which case there is not much money to go round, or they target it at the poorest older pensioners. If their objective is the same as the Government's—to reduce poverty among older pensioners on the lowest incomes—they will applaud what the Government are doing and agree with us that the minimum income guarantee is the right way to provide dignity to people in retirement who have not been able to put aside resources for private pension provision. If the Liberal Democrats want to abolish poverty, they should join us and ensure that the minimum income guarantee works.

Hon. Members have not spoken much about the need to create a pension system that ensures that people do not need to fall on means-tested benefits, but the Government are creating such a system with legislation that we passed last year to create stakeholder pensions and with the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, which is currently before the House. That will create the state second pension and reform the state earnings-related pension to provide a better return for people on the lowest earnings. For those earning under £9,500 a year, the state second pension will provide twice the pension on maturity that SERPS provides at the moment.

[Mr. Bayley]

The problem with the state earnings-related pension lies within the name itself: it is earnings related, so it is the poorest people at work who get the lowest pensions. We are reforming that with a state second pension. We are also providing credits to carers and to disabled people whose employment record has been disrupted by their state of health.

For today's pensioners, we are providing substantially more than simple price indexation. We abolished VAT on fuel, as we promised we would. We reduced it to the lowest level allowed under legislation that the Conservatives agreed with Brussels.

The Government have abolished the gas levy. We have introduced the winter fuel allowances, and increased them fivefold to £100 per household—which is almost £2 per week on top of the indexation to be introduced from next April.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 41, Noes 300.

Division No. 27] **[7 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Dawson, Hilton
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Bob Russell and
Mr. Edward Davey.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret

Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes that the Government inherited a situation where increasing numbers of pensioners were living in poverty and where, if nothing had been done, one in three people would have retired on to means-tested benefits by the middle of this century; congratulates the Government on the start it has made in dealing with these problems; applauds in particular the introduction of the Minimum Income Guarantee, benefiting one and a half million pensioner households, and welcomes the Government's commitment to raising it in line with earnings for the rest of this Parliament and to conducting a take-up campaign to ensure that pensioners get what they are entitled to; supports the Government's commitment to helping pensioners, including the restoration of free eye tests and the new winter fuel payments, which benefit over seven million pensioner households and will be paid every year from now on; welcomes the Government's commitment to extending further help with pensioners' needs, including free television licences for people aged 75 or over from next autumn and the extension of concessionary public transport fare schemes; supports the Government's commitment to letting pensioners benefit more from their savings through the minimum tax guarantee which now means that two thirds of pensioners now pay no income tax; and welcomes the Government's plans to reform pensions, through the new stakeholder pensions and second state pension, so that everyone who puts in a full life of working or caring will in due course be able to retire on an income above means-tested levels.

Post Office Services

[Relevant documents: The Eleventh Report from the Trade and Industry Committee, Session 1998–99, on the Horizon Project for Automated Payment of Benefits through Post Offices (HC 530), the Twelfth Report, Session 1998–99, on The 1999 Post Office White Paper (HC 94) and the Government's responses thereto (Session 1999–2000, HC 50).]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is a matter that I think that you will be interested in, and concerned about. I attended a debate in Westminster Hall last Wednesday—and a very good debate it was—on the problems of post offices and post office closures, which concern every hon. Member. It was an interesting debate, to which many hon. Members contributed and the Minister responded with a helpful and concerned speech. All present appreciated his promise to look into various issues.

One sitting day later—Thursday was the only other sitting day since then—the Liberal Democrats have chosen to debate the same subject. Madam Speaker is now responsible for two Chambers, whereas before we had just one. Does she have any control over whether both Chambers debate the same subject at the same time, or whether they debate one subject and another—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order. The House has decided that the issue is so important that it should be debated again.

Mr. Steen *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It was not a point of order. The hon. Gentleman must be fair. He is eating into time that has been allocated to an Opposition party.

7.15 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I beg to move,

That this House deplores the continuing decline under successive governments in the sub-post office network which is contributing to growing financial exclusion especially among pensioners and other low-income groups; regrets the Government's intention to press ahead with automated credit transfer from 2003 which will lead to further large scale closures and will deny freedom of choice; and urges the Government to postpone automated credit transfer until the Post Office has developed its own automated platform and, as part of the Universal Service Obligation, require Post Office Counters to maintain a sub-post office network which satisfies broad social and economic as well as narrow financial criteria of viability.

In reply to the point of order, you stole my opening lines, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wanted to acknowledge from the outset that the issue has aroused a great deal of interest in the House. We have had a succession of debates, one of which was held last week. There was another in October, prompted by my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood), and yet another in July. It is right that the issue should be debated frequently. We are all concerned about it. Every constituency has post office branches under threat. Some 28 million people use the post office system every week, through its branches. It is right that as many hon. Members as possible should wish to say something about the issue. Some of the Minister's answers in last week's debate were reassuring, but many of them did not answer the key questions. That is why we have initiated the debate today.

The network has gone through a long process of decline. I am sure that the Minister will reinforce that point. The process did not start two years ago. The branch network has been declining for 20 years, with about 200 closures a year. The tempo seems to have increased recently, going up to 230 or 240 closures a year, but we are dealing with a long-term trend.

Everyone concerned has been alarmed by the impact of the compulsory change to automated credit transfer between 2003 and 2005. The Post Office will then lose the £400 million income that it derives from that service. That is important, because it strikes at the basic revenue stream of the post office network.

The implications were spelled out in the answer to a helpful parliamentary question tabled a few weeks ago by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), who asked for an estimate of the number of branches in each constituency at which benefits account for more than 40 per cent. of business. That would give a rough approximation of the impact of the change and show how many branches might be expected to close. It is just an approximation, but it is the only one that we have. The figures are instructive, pointing to an enormous cull of post office branches, particularly in inner city and rural areas. Some of the examples are striking. All hon. Members should look at the list to see how their constituencies might be affected.

In the constituencies of the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, two thirds of all branches could be expected to disappear, on this estimate. There is no respect for ideology. The leader of the Conservative party would lose 33 branches and the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) would lose 37. Some of the worst affected constituencies are represented by my hon. Friends. At the top of the hit list is my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith), who would lose 38 branches, but several other Liberal Democrat constituencies would lose well over 30, including Montgomeryshire, Orkney and Shetland and Torridge and West Devon. Most of the rural constituencies in Cornwall, Wales and Scotland would lose well over 20 branches. The impact could be substantial.

The figures may be wrong. I shall be interested to hear the Minister's reaction.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): My hon. Friend knows that the constituency of Ceredigion has many post offices that are likely to close. It has been estimated that half the post offices in mid-Wales will close. Will that not be a great deprivation for rural people on low incomes?

Dr. Cable: I apologise to my hon. Friend for missing Brecon and Radnor from the list, as it was mentioned. In Ceredigion, 40 branches are at risk—the second highest number in Britain. Before Ministers get out their atlases to find out where this constituency is—presumably they will have to visit it—they will need answers as to why Government policy on plausible assumptions will lead to the loss of roughly two thirds of post office branches.

There has been some evidence of panic recently, and the Secretary of State came up with a suggested partial remedy—a system of appeals. I would be interested to know what it amounts to. The proposal has been superimposed on another suggestion—made in the White Paper—that the regulator, when one is established, should set some objective, independent benchmark for deciding when post office branches should remain open or closed. It is important that we understand how this mechanism is to work if we are to understand how these closures, if they take place, are to be managed.

I can visualise a situation where 200 branches are closing a year, or four a week, and where we have a meaningful system of appeals on which judgments are made as to the continuation of the branch in question. However, if 40 branches are closing a week, how will the system handle it? If the branches are simply not viable because of the loss of Post Office income, what is the purpose of the appeal? The principle of an appeals system when the system itself is not financially viable raises all sorts of basic questions.

I have doubts as to the capacity of Post Office Counters, as currently structured and motivated, to handle the system. In July, in an Adjournment debate, I raised the case of one of my constituents who had her business effectively expropriated by Post Office Counters, which closed the branch, with no meaningful appeal. She has lost her money. The branch has reopened down the road, with an inferior service. All that has happened, apparently, is that Post Office Counters has pocketed the franchise fee.

As a result of the debate, the criminal investigation branch of the Post Office has been set upon this postmistress. No charges have been pressed, but there has been a great deal of harassment. When her lawyers asked why this had taken place, they were told that my constituent was being taught a lesson for bringing the matter to Parliament. That is the way some people in the Post Office network are operating.

It is not simply a question of allowing appeals against closures. It is necessary also to have a system by which postmasters and postmistresses are given some security of tenure so that they can continue their business. We need a transparent system in which complaints can be measured, and a Post Office Counters regime which is genuinely entrepreneurial and committed to keeping branches open.

I have cited one example that angered me greatly, but many hon. Members will know of cases of small branches being closed down. The branches are then re-advertised on a part-time basis by Post Office Counters, which makes it clear that there is no prospect of the business being continued.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): Does my hon. Friend accept that it is worse than just a question of financial viability? In my constituency, 58 per cent. of sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses live on site, and have mortgages and loans that are integral parts of their business. If they lose their businesses, they may also lose their homes.

Dr. Cable: Absolutely. That is why we need a system of appeals, and why we need to protect the security of postmasters and postmistresses who are basically entrepreneurs in an insecure environment. I challenge the Minister to give us his own estimate of the impact of the loss of Post Office income. It may be that the figures that I have cited are implausible. However, they could be much worse.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that unnecessary scaremongering can undermine the post office network? I have visited post offices in my constituency, and the myths being peddled by both main Opposition parties are severely undermining them. Does he agree that he needs to be measured in his approach?

Dr. Cable: I do not know whether I am scaremongering. The figures that I have cited were produced in response to a perfectly fair question from a Labour Back Bencher. If those figures are wrong, the Minister might explain how the Post Office itself estimates the loss of income's impact on the network. There are reasonable grounds for believing that the impact will be a great deal worse. One of the reasons for that is that when people spend money in a post office, there is a footfall effect—they spend money on other things. It is not simply the loss of the benefit income.

Another factor is that it is not simply the benefit business that is at risk. Other fee transactions of the Post Office—such as drivers' licences—could disappear also. We have seen recently that the working families tax credit is taking another source of benefit income out of the Post Office. The impact could be much worse than the figures that I have quoted. That is the answer to the charge of scaremongering.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The constituency of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) falls within the area covered by *The Western Morning News*, a well respected regional newspaper. The information that it carries from postmasters and postmistresses in her constituency is entirely supportive of the point that my hon. Friend is making. It has been suggested by a number of Government supporters that this problem will arise only in the future—from 2003 onwards. However, I have constituents who have been sent benefits information which specifically rules out the use of a post office account and demands information about their bank accounts.

Dr. Cable: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. I wish to refer also to what will happen to those excluded people when ACT comes in. We are concerned not just with the impact on the branch network, but the impact on the individuals who receive their benefits.

What is involved here is a system of compulsion. There is voluntary ACT at present, and people do use their own bank accounts for the settlement of benefits. Roughly 48 per cent. of pensioners choose voluntarily to use their bank accounts. However, that figure is much lower for poorer people—under 10 per cent. of people on income support, for example. There will have to be considerable pressure to stop people using post offices and to get them to use bank accounts. That is the essence of the problem—the element of coercion.

The Government may reply that they are tying up deals with the banks, so that people will continue to be able to use the hole in the wall and their arrangements will not

[Dr. Cable]

be changed fundamentally. But if it is true that large numbers of branches have to close, the post office will no longer be there to be used as a bank, so choice will no longer be present.

Separate problems have been highlighted by groups such as Age Concern, the Townswomen's Guild—it is difficult to think of a less militant organisation—and the Retail Village Network. One could not accuse such responsible lobbying organisations of scaremongering. These groups are focusing on the problems of the 20 per cent. of people who use post offices but do not have bank accounts.

How will the Post Office identify the people who do not have bank accounts? How will the Post Office establish criteria for deciding who should continue to be paid in the traditional way because they cannot have a bank account—people who are bankrupt, for example—and those who choose not to have a bank account? How, in fact, will the distinction be made?

Another large group of people, for reasons of personal choice, have traditionally decided that although they have a bank account, they would much rather use post offices. Probably half of all those who use the Post Office system are in this category. Why do they choose not to use their bank accounts? One reason is geographic: only about 5 per cent. of rural parishes have banks and the number is declining as branches close, but 60 per cent. have post offices. There would be a high cost involved in going to the nearest town to transact the business.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the view of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) was roundly contradicted only last Wednesday in Westminster Hall by the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ), who rightly expressed the gravest concern for the future, under Government proposals, for people who do not have bank accounts?

Dr. Cable: I thank the hon. Gentleman: that is indeed the case.

Why else might people choose not to use their bank accounts? There is legitimate anxiety about the costs of banking. What assurance is there that money paid into a bank account will not be offset against an overdraft? What hidden charges will go with the new arrangements between the banks and the post offices? How will the scheme fit with the plans of Barclays and others to start charging for using automated telling machines? Barclays and the Co-operative bank have already entered into arrangements, but will a pensioner using another bank who draws £10 for the weekend have to pay £1 for the transaction? There may be good answers, but we have not yet had them.

We need to be clearer about what happens to people who cannot collect their benefits in person. We all know people in that category. Their carers collect for them. There is no problem with that at the post office, where there is an established relationship, but we know that it is much more difficult in the banking system. I had to take all the way to the chairman of the Halifax the case of a blind lady with a carer who ended up paying £60 for a legal notary's signature to establish the authenticity of the person drawing the money. Banks can be highly inflexible, bureaucratic and expensive.

We need answers to all those questions before people can have any confidence that the arrangements can be sustained properly.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): It is also important for some mothers to collect child benefit direct from a post office or sub-post office, because their only other access to money may be via their husband in a joint bank account. It is terribly important for them to maintain that independence.

Dr. Cable: That is a helpful additional point, and the welfare campaign groups have already drawn attention to many others.

The Minister may be able to help us with solutions to some of the problems, but we need to know what is driving the change in the first place. Why is it so urgent that we press ahead? Two important, possibly compelling, reasons are given. One is that the system is necessary to defeat fraud; the other is that it is very costly—£400 million a year in transaction costs—to have a paper-based rather than an electronic system.

We need to deal with those serious challenges in turn. My understanding—I am open to contradiction by the Minister—is that the best way of dealing with fraud at the post office is to have bar-coded books. Why was that option never pursued? The previous Government expensively pursued the option of swipe cards. I am not sure who carries most blame for the sorry tale, but somehow or other £300 million of taxpayers' money slipped through the cracks and the whole project has been abandoned.

The Trade and Industry Committee produced a devastating report explaining the enormous waste of public money on that false lead in dealing with the fraud problem. The Committee's members will be familiar with the key paragraph that makes it clear that the swipe card system was abandoned at such heavy cost primarily because the Benefits Agency, which was driving the whole exercise, was determined to save on the transaction costs and would not let the project be seen through to a conclusion.

There is a real saving to be made on the £400 million transaction costs in moving from a paper-based to an electronic system, not merely a paper saving to the Benefits Agency, but what is the price that we will pay for that saving for the agency and, ultimately, for the Treasury? The Government may respond to the political pressure to compensate the Post Office for the loss of all the branches, and the payment, made through the deal with the banks or directly by the Treasury, could be large. If the network is to be preserved in that way, where will the saving come from?

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who originally presided over the system, said that it was very likely that, if the Government were serious about trying to maintain the post office network, the £400 million saving would simply disappear; so why go through the upheaval? It is more likely, though, that that will not happen and that the Government will allow the network to decline. There will be an appeals system and some token effort to save branches here and there; the £400 million will be saved by the Treasury; but there will be a great cost to our rural, suburban and inner-city communities.

Which of the two directions are the Government going in? Will they provide substantial compensation for the loss to the post office network of £400 million of business, and how much of the network will they save? Are they driven by the Treasury or by the interests of the communities that we all serve?

7.37 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Alan Johnson): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the fact that the Government will be introducing a Bill to modernise the Post Office; notes the contrast with years of Tory inaction, that left the Post Office to decline; welcomes the reduction of the External Financing Limit and the ability to borrow which will boost the Post Office's ability to invest for the future, welcomes for the first time the clear commitment of the Government to a network throughout the United Kingdom of post offices which will be automated, and to introduce for the first time criteria for access to Post Office services; welcomes the fact that for the first time the Universal Service Obligation will be guaranteed in legislation; welcomes the study by the Performance and Innovation Unit which is looking at the future of the network; and notes that the policies of the Opposition would undoubtedly lead to the decline of the Post Office."

The Government are deeply committed to the protection of postal services for all customers now and in the future. That is why we published in July our White Paper "A World Class Service for the 21st Century", which will be presented to the House as a Bill in the near future.

As the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) said on a point of order, much has already been said in the House on our plans for the Post Office. Only last Wednesday, in what could be called a sub-office of this Crown office, I replied to the fourth debate on the post office network this Session. It might be helpful, however, if I repeat the steps that the Government are taking not only to secure access for customers to postal services but to equip the business for the challenges that it faces in the communications market of the 21st century.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Why, does the Minister think, have we had those four debates? I hope that he recognises that the issue is of the profoundest concern to many millions of our constituents.

Mr. Johnson: I do indeed recognise that. I have said time and again that no one believes more than I do in the strength of the network and its importance to rural and urban areas. I merely pointed out that we are having something of a rerun of the same debate.

We are committed to establishing a framework to enable the Post Office to develop to its full potential by providing the greater commercial and financial freedom that the business needs to tackle the triple challenge of globalisation, liberalisation and new technology, while ensuring that we retain the vital social obligations that make the Post Office such an important detail in the social fabric of our country.

Over the past seven years, the challenge from overseas competitors has become ever more intense. At least six overseas postal administrations have established offices within a few miles of the House to entice British companies to print and post abroad. For years, overseas postal administrations have exploited the fact that the Post Office has been operating with one hand tied behind its back, with negligible commercial freedom; with no ability to invest other than from retained profits; with large chunks of those profits siphoned off by the Exchequer; and with its future under constant review since 1992.

The Post Office must have the freedom to compete in the radically changed postal market while continuing to provide services such as articles for the blind, post buses and its other social obligations, which are vital to the communities that it serves.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): I appreciate the response that my hon. Friend gave in last week's debate in Westminster Hall and I am grateful for the informative material that he has given me as briefing in response to my constituents' queries. Postmasters in Queensferry, Golftyn, Wepre, Caergwrle and Saltney Ferry have been to see me or written to me about their concerns. I am grateful for what my hon. Friend has done, but will he meet a small deputation of postmasters from my constituency later in the year?

Mr. Johnson: I can never resist an invitation from my right hon. Friend. I will meet his constituents, just as I will go to East Anglia the week after next to meet sub-postmasters in that area and to the south-west the week after for the same reason. I understand the concerns on this issue, some of which have been expressed by Opposition Members.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The Minister will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to invite him to my constituency or to the constituency of Ceredigion, where the issue is equally important. On a serious note, the Minister mentioned competitiveness, but how will depriving a sub-post office of 40 per cent. of its income make it more competitive? His response last Wednesday offered no cheer to those in that position.

Mr. Johnson: I obviously cannot visit every constituency and talk to all postmasters, but I will tell local sub-postmasters and mistresses that they should be wary of opportunism by politicians that undermines the network and creates the very circumstances that we are all trying to avoid.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I visited post offices in Wales in September and if the Minister finds it too onerous to get around the country to visit them, I should be happy to share that responsibility with him.

Mr. Johnson: That is not worthy of a response. It is obvious that I need to stay in the House to deal with the countless debates that we have on the Post Office.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for what he has already done for the Crown post office in my constituency. It was closed, to the great frustration of the 450 businesses on the Slough trading estate, and I hope that he can continue with his good offices to bring the Post Office and Slough trading estate together to ensure that the people and businesses in my constituency, which he knows so well, get the post office service that they deserve.

Mr. Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments, and I will do everything that I can to protect

[Mr. Johnson]

postal services in Slough, where I was a postman for 15 years. Our plans to enable the Post Office to compete in the 21st century are set out in the White Paper. We have put forward a package of reforms that will maintain and improve postal services in this country and enable our Post Office to become a major global player while it is retained in public ownership.

The record of the previous Government was lamentable. In July 1992, the Conservative Government announced that they would sell off Parcelforce and review the status of the rest of the business. By April 1997, having spent £1.5 million in consultancy fees, the Conservatives' manifesto said that, if elected, they would sell off Parcelforce and review the status of the rest of the business. They had promised in their 1992 manifesto to introduce a regulator and a number of other initiatives but, like the millennium wheel, they failed to start when they promised, and then just went round in a huge circle.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Post Office's situation today was largely created by the Conservatives and that, instead of criticising him because he cannot visit every constituency, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) should visit them all herself to apologise for the high development costs that the Conservatives caused?

Mr. Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for those important remarks. In the early 1990s, the Labour party joined the Post Office trade unions and the British public to oppose vigorously the then Government's plans to break up and privatise the business. We argued for commercial freedom in the public sector. In the face of overwhelming opposition, the Conservatives eventually abandoned their plans but decided that, if they could not privatise the Post Office, they would plunder it.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Johnson: I give way to an hon. Member who knows all about those issues.

Mr. McLoughlin: The Minister mentioned the millennium wheel, but perhaps he should remember that the Prime Minister opened it a month ago, and it is not yet working. It is not likely to be working for another two months.

Mr. Johnson: I am sure that we will be selling tickets for the millennium wheel over post office counters very soon.

Responding to criticism of the fact that the Post Office had had to hand over £1 billion in 10 years to Government under the external financing limit, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), then President of the Board of Trade, announced in March 1995:

> "I am prepared to agree that, in future, we will aim to set the EFL at about half the Post Office's forecast post-tax profit. I hope to make progress in this direction this Autumn".

A few months later, that pledge was ignored and, instead, the EFL was increased to cream off a further £1 billion over the following three years.

The Post Office touches people's lives like no other industry and is part of the country's infrastructure like no other business. It delivers to 27.5 million addresses six days a week. It collects from hundreds of thousands of pillar boxes seven days a week, and 28 million people each week use its network of sub and Crown post offices.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I hope that it will not be opportunistic if I intervene on behalf of the 150,000 members of the public who signed a petition in the *Western Daily Press* in support of their sub-post offices. If sub-post offices are to lose part of their income, how will it be replaced? If the Minister cannot answer that, how can sub-postmasters and mistresses plan ahead, put business plans together or have any hope of transferring their businesses to other owners?

Mr. Johnson: If the hon. Gentleman will be patient, I shall come on to those points in a few moments. I was setting out the Government's policy for reinvigorating the Post Office. The White Paper sets out a balanced package of reforms that will preserve those services and benefit the Post Office, its employees and its customers.

Under the reforms, for the first time, we will create an arm's length relationship with Government, based on a five-year strategic plan, giving the Post Office greater freedoms to develop new products and services; to price commercially; and to borrow for growth investments. For the first time, we will introduce a tough, independent regulator, the Postal Services Commission, to promote and protect customer interests, set high-quality standards, regulate prices, and promote competition and innovation. We will strengthen consumer representation through a revamped and reinvigorated Post Office Users National Council and we will put additional resources into the Post Office, more than doubling the post-tax earnings that the Post Office can keep for investment, rather than paying to government. Also for the first time, we will enshrine the universal service obligation and the single uniform tariff in law, and we will establish access criteria to protect a nationwide network of post offices.

As part of the package, we have already reduced the Government's take to a dividend at commercial levels—50 per cent. of post-tax profits for 1999–2000, falling to 40 per cent. thereafter. We have allowed the Post Office to invest substantially overseas by approving the acquisition of German Parcel, an investment of nearly £300 million and we have allowed the Post Office to borrow up to £75 million each year without prior approval, a facility that it has already used for further smaller European acquisitions in the parcels market.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset) *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) has just walked into the Chamber. It really is bad manners for him to intervene in a debate to which other hon. Members wish to contribute.

Mr. Bruce: I was here earlier, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am most grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene.

The Minister said that he was going to get universal service enshrined in law. Does that apply to the counters side of the business, as well as to the postal side?

At present, it is enshrined in the contract with the Department of Social Security that that service will be delivered universally.

Mr. Johnson: One of the greatest crimes in the post office is to jump the queue, but I hope to cover that point later in my speech.

Under the White Paper reforms, Post Office plc will be independent, publicly owned, and able to attract, quickly and effectively, the necessary interest from financial institutions that understand the plc model.

Although I spoke about this matter at some length last Wednesday, let me underline our determination to secure the future of the Post Office Counters network. As the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) rightly said, post offices have been closing at a rate of 1 per cent. of the network a year for 20 years. Neither the Government nor the Post Office can guarantee that no post office will ever close in the future but, for the first time, we will introduce access criteria laying down minimum standards to ensure that everybody in the UK has reasonable access to Post Office Counters services, particularly in rural parts of the country and in areas of social deprivation. The postal services commission and the users council will monitor the network against these criteria.

The Horizon project is being put back on track and some 40,000 counter positions at more than 18,000 post offices will be equipped with a modern, on-line computer system to enable the Post Office to modernise and improve services to existing customers, and to win new business.

Mr. Tyler: Will the Minister set out the time scale involved? If the operation is not complete by 2003, when ACT will have pushed more people to use banks, it will not be effective in saving so many post offices. In what particular way do his plans differ from those of his Conservative predecessors? I recall that, when he was on this side of the House—[HON. MEMBERS: "He was only elected in 1997."] When the Minister's colleagues were in opposition, they stood four square with Liberal Democrat Members in attacking the very proposals that he is now pursuing.

Mr. Johnson: I was amazed when I read the motion that we are debating. It has been public knowledge for some time that we will computerise the vast Post Office network by spring 2001. The migration to ACT will not even begin until 2003, and will be phased over the next two years.

We realise that, for many people, this is a worrying time. The interest in this and previous debates on the subject underlines the public's high regard for the Post Office and the services that it provides.

Mr. Steen: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to ask my question. He has said that Post Office services and rural post offices are safe with the Government. If that is so, what are the Liberal Democrats whingeing about?

Mr. Johnson: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman asks that question of others.

The very fine speech made in Westminster Hall by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) last Wednesday intelligently and clearly set out the arguments for those concerned about access to postal services. My hon. Friend had taken the time and trouble to look into the matter. His constituency was the pilot area for the use of benefit payments cards, and those hon. Members who are genuinely uneasy about those matters should read my hon. Friend's speech. He set the positive tone that others should follow if we are to avoid the network being blighted by politicians talking down the Post Office, as the Liberal Democrats have done again in the motion that we are seeking to amend.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I rise to help out the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). He stated earlier that the debate was a waste of time, but he has sat through all of it so far. I can tell the Minister what Liberal Democrat Members are whingeing about. In his response to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), the Minister has not yet answered the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). What is he offering to those sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses whose businesses will be on the edge when he takes away 40 per cent. of their business? What practical alternatives will he propose that will mean that those post offices are safe in the Government's hands?

Mr. Johnson: The hon. Gentleman should be patient. I have not yet finished my speech and, with the leave of the House, I intend to reply to the debate. All the points that have been raised will be covered—in fact, many of them were covered last Wednesday.

This is a time of change, and change is sometimes unsettling. It is our duty to give a positive lead, and I am confident that our package of measures will give the Post Office and its customers a future to look forward to.

The programmes that we have put in place for the Horizon project will provide post offices with an integrated and on-line IT platform that will modernise the way that they operate. Some cynical views have been expressed about the Treasury's role in this. However, I can tell the House that the Treasury is contributing £500 million to computerise and place on-line every post office in the country. It is inconceivable that that investment would be made only for the offices to close down afterwards.

A key benefit from the project will be the Post Office's ability substantially to extend its existing arrangements with the high street banks, under which it provides a range of banking services on an agency basis. That is a vital factor also in the attack on social exclusion.

The wider work that the Government have commissioned on the matter has demonstrated that financial exclusion is both a cause and an effect of social exclusion. It has highlighted the desirability of promoting the spread of bank accounts, and has shown that encouraging the unbanked—especially the disadvantaged—to open a bank account will provide financial as well as social advantages to them as individuals. It is also an important step in connecting the socially excluded to the mainstream.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Has the Minister received commitments from the clearing banks to provide universal access to banking services? Will they take any customer who goes to them wanting benefit payments? Will he indicate the charges that a clearing

[Mr. Richard Allan]

bank might levy against benefit customers who want no other banking service apart from the complete encashment of their benefit payment, which is what they do at present with their girocheques?

Mr. Johnson: As I said last week, we are confident that we will negotiate agreements with the clearing banks that will ensure the provision of the services that we want to be provided. We gave a clear commitment in last week's debate that benefit claimants will continue to be able to withdraw all their benefit cash across a post office counter, both before and after the change.

Increasingly, benefit customers choose payment by bank account as their preferred method. One third of benefit recipients already choose to access their benefits payments via their bank account, and the trend is bound to accelerate. Working together, the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters will ensure that, from 2003, payment by ACT will offer an attractive and secure choice to benefit customers and to pensioners.

Payment by ACT will open up access to a wider range of banking services and other financial services, while continuing to offer access to cash at Post Office Counters. Other bank customers, especially those in rural areas, will benefit from the wider availability of banking facilities, and the taxpayer will benefit from the fact that such a system will be much cheaper to operate and will virtually eliminate fraudulent encashment.

The move to paying benefits direct into bank accounts via the existing automated credit transfer system will not start before 2003, as I said, and it will be phased in over two years. The Government will not take active measures to move customers on to automated credit transfer before 2003. With automation completed by spring 2001, Post Office Counters will have a further two years to grow new areas of work to compensate for what has always been an unhealthy and fragile over-reliance on Benefits Agency work.

Given developments in banking technology, and with new simple banking products being introduced, we believe that it will be possible to cater to individual circumstances and provide accounts that will answer individual needs. The majority of benefits recipients—more than 80 per cent.—already have access to bank accounts. However, we recognise that some may still be unwilling to make use of a bank account. It is not our intention to compel them to do so. For such people, we are considering what alternative simple electronic money transmissions systems using ACT which could also be accessed at post offices may be commercially available. We recognise that benefits recipients will expect to be able to withdraw the exact amount of their benefits and to do so without incurring bank charges.

I emphasise again that there will be no change to existing methods of benefit payment before 2003, and that all benefits recipients and state pensioners who wish to do so will be able to continue to access their benefits in cash, at post offices, both before and after the change.

By moving to ACT, we will merely be replacing outdated paper-based methods of payment, which have scarcely changed in the past 50 years with a modern, more secure and more cost-effective system. Ensuring that individuals will continue to be able to access their benefits and pensions in cash at post offices is fundamental to our plans.

The Post Office network, with its nationwide reach, represents a valuable channel for the delivery of Government and other services, and will continue to do so in the future. The early progress with the Horizon automated platform now in prospect should enable Post Office Counters to offer substantial enhancements to the services that it can offer clients and customers, which in turn will increase the attractiveness of post offices compared with other channels.

The network's extensive reach and the sense of trust and familiarity that many customers have in carrying out transactions in their local post office should, in conjunction with the Horizon system, ensure that the Post Office is well placed to deliver modern applications for central and local government and other public sector organisations. That is crucial in the light of the fact that the Government are committed to providing all Government services on-line by 2008.

The Post Office has had some success in recent years in diversifying into new areas of business. The success of the lottery business carried out in post office outlets, the establishment of bureaux de change facilities—the Post Office is now the biggest dealer in the country—and personal insurance are notable examples.

The strength of the Post Office's business lies in its ability to reach customers in all corners of the United Kingdom, but such an extensive network can prosper only if it continues to be used by the local community which it serves in rural and urban areas. If local communities value the presence of a post office outlet, as so many clearly do, their best guarantee of retaining it lies in making full use of the facilities on both sides of the business. To give credit where it is due, the Post Office continues to make every effort, particularly in rural areas, to keep a post office service operating. I shall look into the case raised by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) about his constituent.

Where suitable applicants to take over a post office cannot be found, community offices, based in village halls, pubs, and private homes are set up to maintain at least a range of key services.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): On the point about the Post Office striving to maintain rural post offices in our communities, does my hon. Friend share my concern over the decision just last week of the Post Office in Wales to withdraw an offer of a sub-post office franchise to Julie Morgan of Garregwen in Bonvilston, just a few weeks after it had made the initial offer? We now do not have a post office between Cowbridge and Ely in south Wales—a distance of some 20 miles.

Mr. Johnson: I will look into that important point. It reminds me of the fairly disparaging remarks made about the appeals process. As we discussed in Westminster Hall last week, the problem too often with post office closures and conversions from Crown offices, sometimes centrally located, into the back of hardware shops well out of the centre of town, is that the local community believes that there is no sufficient appeals procedure giving them the time and the opportunity genuinely to offer alternatives to that post office closing.

The appeals procedure that we announced just after Christmas was not in reply to a flood of post office closures—that is not what we are about. The procedure is to protect customers' interests and to provide a new focus in an area in which, too often, the local community has been ignored.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes) *rose—*

Mr. Johnson: I must come to a conclusion.

We have repeatedly made clear our wish to see a thriving nationwide network of post offices. We understand the difficulties involved in transition, but the way to tackle the issue is not, as some local newspapers have suggested, to cling to the status quo. There is no surer route to stagnation and decline, as the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters fully and wisely recognises. The future of the Post Office Counters network depends to an important extent on the skills and dedication of its managers and staff. Above all, it depends on its continued attractiveness to clients and customers as a channel for accessing products and services, and to sub-postmasters, who have invested more than £1 billion in the network, as an attractive business proposition.

Through early progress with the Horizon platform now in prospect, the Post Office will continue to maintain a nationwide network of outlets which will provide customers with convenient access to its services and help counters to retain existing custom and attract new business. The establishment of access criteria will, for the first time, set out in law a Government commitment to monitor what is happening to the network and a requirement to act where necessary.

The revamped consumer body and a new independent regulator will monitor the new arrangements and provide an effective voice for communities which fear that access may be impaired.

Mr. Kirkwood: Will the Minister accept a helpful intervention?

Mr. Johnson: If it is helpful, yes.

Mr. Kirkwood: I was encouraged because the Minister was good enough to reply an Adjournment debate that I secured on the subject. He mentioned that the Prime Minister had just set up, through the performance and innovation unit, a committee to look at the social value of post offices. Many of us are hanging a lot of hope and expectation on that. Can the hon. Gentleman add to his speech two or three sentences about the committee's remit, and does it have any opportunity for considering alternative sources of income that might sustain some of these businesses in future?

Mr. Johnson: That was helpful but premature—I am just coming to that point. The legitimate concerns expressed by hon. Members are being addressed by the performance and innovation unit study commissioned last autumn—on the very day of the Adjournment debate, I believe—and due to report directly to the Prime Minister. In that way, we can ensure the viability of a network that depends partly on Government but essentially on local communities continuing to make sufficient use of their post office and village shop. The PIU study focuses clearly on the social obligations and the social value of the Post Office—a network that is socially necessary but sometimes not commercially viable. That is the principal aim of that examination.

Mrs. Gilroy: Will my hon. Friend also draw to the Opposition's attention the report on access to financial services by the Treasury's policy action team? It goes into considerable detail about the role of post offices and sub-post offices in addressing social exclusion. As that is a criticism in the Liberal Democrat motion, I think that it is high time they read the report.

Mr. Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention.

Last Monday was the 160th anniversary of the introduction of the penny post and Rowland Hill's other great reforms. Those radical changes created the modern Post Office by transforming an organisation that had, even in 1840, been a central feature of British life for 300 years. In Victorian Britain, the Post Office dealt with 75 million items every year. It now handles that volume every working day.

Our reforms are the most radical since Rowland Hill's, but they preserve the principles of accessibility, affordability and, above all, public service that he established. I commend the Government's amendment to the House.

8.9 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): When the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry sent hon. Members his "Dear colleague" letter last May, announcing out of the blue that the Government had decided to change their action on benefit payments through the post office network, we waited for a month for the imminent White Paper. In July 1999, when the Secretary of State introduced the White Paper, we discovered that no viable option was on offer that would give hope for the future to many of our smaller, more sparsely spread post offices. Within a week, the Conservative party used a half-day Opposition debate to bring the matter to the Floor of the House. We thought the matter so important that that was our immediate reaction.

Since then, there have been many debates on the Post Office, including the one that I attended last week in Westminster Hall. The issue keeps coming before us, and Ministers keep having to come to the Dispatch Box, because there is great uncertainty. So much time has elapsed since the statement last July that post offices are already feeling the pinch. People trying to dispose of their businesses, and others considering buying a post office, are taking into account the prospect of a 30 per cent. drop in revenue by 2003.

Those of us who represent large rural constituencies know—although this is not an exclusively rural matter; I am equally concerned about post offices on the suburban fringe—that unless we receive answers to the many questions raised about the Government's change in policy, the situation will become worse long before the change to automated credit transfer, which the Government are determined to push through in 2003.

Mr. Livsey: The hon. Lady makes some cogent points about rural areas and their post offices. Does she agree,

[Mr. Livsey]

however, that there was a cut in the hours during which sub-post offices were allowed to operate under the previous Conservative Government? That often made the business unviable, particularly when a new tenant took it over. Will she pledge that the Conservatives will not reduce the hours of sub-post offices in future?

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman draws attention to the fact that the sub-post office network has been under pressure for some time. No one who has day-to-day dealings with constituency cases would deny that. However, I can think of cases in which hours went up as well as down. The hon. Gentleman's point is important because of changes in the structure of services provided by post offices, and, particularly, because of changes in the businesses in which they are located, which are as key to their viability as the Post Office itself. The post office has sometimes become the village shop, which has diminished the service. We all know that people often shop once a week outside their villages, and for that and many other reasons the position of the village post office has worsened.

We face a change in the policy that the Government inherited. Their proposals leave many questions unanswered. We do not know what sort of post office network we shall have in 2003, if the Government have their way. People will be obliged to have benefits paid into a bank account, although the Minister has told us tonight that they may be able to receive their benefits in cash through electronic transfer. He told us that there will be no cost to the people concerned, but we should like to know his estimate of the costs of the new system by comparison with the costs of the one he inherited. Who will pick up the transaction cost?

The Minister was asked those questions by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), and I asked them last week and last July. Seven months after the July statement, the Minister remains unable to answer specific questions. The Secretary of State changed the policy last May. He did so without any idea of what system would replace the existing one. Since then, there have been all sorts of suggestions about how the Government would shore up what will clearly be a significant drop in revenue. We believe that there is a question mark over the viability of 50 per cent. of the country's 18,000 sub-post offices.

The Secretary of State leapt into the press the moment he heard that Camelot and the Post Office would put together a joint venture for a renewal of Camelot's lottery licence. There was nothing wrong with that bid; let us hope it is successful. However, the Secretary of State's argument that that would help rural post offices merely flagged up his lack of knowledge both of the lottery system and of what happens when there are terminals in small outlets in rural areas.

I have had to write to Camelot repeatedly about small post offices or shops that had terminals but were unable to maintain 3,000 transactions a week. Terminals have been withdrawn from many of them, and many hon. Members will have had the experience of fighting to have terminals restored. One advantage of having a lottery terminal in a post office is that the terminals increase the footfall of people passing through the premises. Those people buy other things and carry out other transactions, which helps the viability of the unit.

Mr. Alan Johnson: I am extremely interested in the hon. Lady's views on the Post Office. Between now and 2003, when migration starts, there will be a general election. Will the Conservatives fight that election on the platform of privatising the whole of the Post Office, or do they intend to break it up and privatise only half of it?

Mrs. Browning: What an extraordinary question. The Labour Government are going to privatise the Post Office, and they plan to introduce a Bill any day now. We look forward to reading it, and the Conservative manifesto will reflect the changes that the Government make to the Post Office before the general election. The Secretary of State promised that the Bill would turn Royal Mail into a public limited company and that the Government would own 100 per cent. of the shares. During the recess, however, the Secretary of State said that the Government might not own quite 100 per cent. We want to know what privatisation package the Government intend. Once we have seen what we will inherit, we will produce a manifesto telling the British people what we will do.

I am flattered that the Minister wants to know what our manifesto will say, but tonight's debate is not about our manifesto but about the policy that the Government inherited from the Conservative party, which would have secured the payment of benefit. The Minister rightly said that they would have to move away from the old-fashioned system of paper transactions towards the use of a swipe card and, ultimately, a smart card. Answers to oral and written questions gave us every reason to believe, until 29 May last year, that the Government intended to do that.

Some Members in the Chamber this evening were not in Westminster Hall last week when my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), who served both as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and for Social Security, pointed out that if the post office network was going to survive, there would have to be a change in systems and technology, and the network would have to be underpinned by the presence of a customer that pays out benefits—the Government. We fought the last election on that principle, but the Government have changed that policy.

Mrs. Gilroy: The hon. Lady was trying to make a point about the decision taken by the Government in May 1999. I am sure that she has studied in great detail the report of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, which notes:

> "We do not fault Ministers for taking the decision they did in May 1999 in these circumstances. We have not regarded it as part of our task to come to a judgement on decisions taken prior to May 1997; it may be that the inquiry by the Comptroller and Auditor General will cast light on such decisions."

Is the hon. Lady looking forward to dealing with that report?

Mrs. Browning: Of course I am. If there are criticisms about the system and the contracts that were drawn up, that is a legitimate matter for inquiry. However, it in no way detracts from the fact that the Conservative party went into the previous election with a policy that would have ensured that the payment of benefits through post

offices was maintained, with Post Office Counters as a customer of the Government—£400 million of taxpayers' money would have been legitimately used through the post office network to pay out benefits. That would have helped to ensure a viable future for those post offices.

As the hon. Lady is interested in Select Committee reports, I advise her to note the statement that

"Ministers have been less than candid in their responses to the House and to this Committee".

Will she ask Ministers what the Select Committee meant by that?

Mr. Ian Bruce: In his speech, the Minister did not touch on the matter of universal service in respect of counter delivery. In my constituency, five or six rural post offices have been threatened with closure. On each occasion, I have reminded the Post Office of its contract with the Department of Social Security—it has to provide, wherever possible, universal service of counter delivery for the payment of benefits and pensions. The Post Office agrees with me about that universal service provision. The Labour Government are about to remove it. When they have done so, no Member of Parliament will be able to ensure that one of their rural post offices does not close.

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The heart of the matter—as hon. Members have pointed out this evening, and as I did on 15 July—and the reason for the Government's change of policy is not that they have suddenly discovered that IT will be of benefit to post offices. Of course it will be. The Conservative party had already realised that post offices needed to be equipped with computers, not only for benefit transactions but so that they could increase their ticketing and banking business—a range of other opportunities that are not open to them, but which will be when they have computers. What this is all about is a £400 million smash-and-grab raid by the Treasury. Does it not sound a pretty paltry amount compared to the amount of damage that its withdrawal will cause?

As always, when the Treasury wants to claw some money from the Department of Trade and Industry, DTI Ministers and their Secretary of State roll over and play dead. They put up no defence; they do not even consider the consequences of what that withdrawal will mean. Instead, they let the Treasury have its way; they do the Treasury's bidding, and when the problems flood in they set up committee after committee and scheme after scheme to try to shore up the damage.

The DTI team, with a former Treasury Minister as Secretary of State—indeed, almost all the ministerial team are former Treasury Ministers—should have seen this matter coming. They should have realised that they are no longer Treasury Ministers and that, although of course their job is to modernise the Post Office to facilitate the improved technology, they should have considered the knock-on effect of their policies. That point is not confined to the DTI; it has become a hallmark of the Government. They announce something, spin it and spend months looking for solutions to the problems that they have created, causing indecision and uncertainty.

Mr. David Heath: The hon. Lady makes some extremely good points, with many of which I agree. However, I find it rather difficult to reconcile her position with that of the hon. Member for South Hams, who seems to prefer the Government's policy to that of the hon. Lady, and would perhaps describe her remarks as whingeing. Will she attempt to make that reconciliation for us?

Mrs. Browning: I should be delighted to reconcile Members on the Liberal Benches with my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). I have known my hon. Friend for many years. I am not sure how long the reconciliation will take me but, in a spirit of co-operation, I am willing to do it. However, the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) misjudges my hon. Friend, who is most active in his rural constituency in supporting his rural post offices. No doubt when we all meet for drinks, a chat and a bit of counselling, we shall be able to sort things out, but I think that my hon. Friend was concerned about the fact that, although there was a good debate in Westminster Hall, which made an extremely valuable contribution to the subject, it was a pity that the debate was held there because only a limited number of Members were able to speak. Furthermore, only a limited number of people were able to attend the debate.

Mr. Steen: As my hon. Friend is aware, my constituency is now Totnes, not South Hams. The Liberal Democrats are light years away in their backwardness on such matters. They do not realise that things move on.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the problem with Westminster Hall is that, while we are debating there, this Chamber is empty? It is a total waste of public—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. We are not debating the merits of Westminster Hall.

Mrs. Browning: You rightly chide my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, there was concern that when we held that important debate, which was of interest to many members of the public as well as to Members of the House, Westminster Hall was full of schoolchildren. There is nothing wrong with children coming to the House of Commons, but many other members of the public would have liked to hear the debate. I am grateful that we have an opportunity to debate the matter on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Letwin: May I return my hon. Friend to the points she was making before that series of interventions? Does she agree that one of the most remarkable features of the scheme is that, because the Minister did not reply to the question she put a few moments ago, we do not have the slightest idea how much of the £400 million that the Treasury hopes to save will instead be spent on the banks. We do not even know whether the sum is greater than £400 million.

Mrs. Browning: There are many unanswered questions that I shall give the Minister an opportunity to answer. In seven months, they have been repeated several times in several debates. They deserve to be answered. Who will bear the transaction costs of the collection of benefit from the post office when it goes via the clearing bank? The Minister said that it will not be the customer, so it must either be the clearing bank or the post office itself. If that is so, sub-post offices that receive remuneration for that administrative cost will have that remuneration taken

[Mrs. Browning]

away from them, with the prospect that they will incur additional charges in carrying out the Government's new policy for post offices.

During the summer recess, it was obvious that DTI Ministers were putting a lot of pressure on the clearing banks to provide bank accounts for the socially excluded. It sounded nice, but I know from discussions that I have had with the clearing banks that they will not be able to provide bank accounts for the socially excluded and those who, by law, are prohibited from holding bank accounts. If the Minister is to find alternative ways of paying those people, he must take that into account. It would be nice to see a reconciliation sheet showing how the saving of £400 million by the Department of Social Security compares with the additional costs of the various processes that the Government are finding it necessary to cobble together because they did not think things through when the Secretary of State made his policy change decision at the end of May.

We still have an imprecise picture of how people will access their local post office within a reasonable travelling time. It is obvious that, between now and 2003, post offices will close. I do not wish to stir up unhappiness, but I know that people are already finding it difficult to dispose of post offices. Therefore, there are likely to be far fewer post offices everywhere by 2003.

The Minister said, in effect, "In that case, we shall look to provide postal services in village halls and people's front rooms." In my constituency. there is a post office in someone's front room, which is open just two half-days a week. Such innovative changes to the sub-post office network are welcome, and obviously one must be creative and flexible, but the Minister knows that the Post Office White Paper makes a very clear commitment to access. What is the likely cost, and who will fund it? Will he answer those questions tonight? Will the Government provide some additional funding for access? If so, should not it appear on the reconciliation sheet?

I should like to give the Minister the opportunity to answer these questions in terms tonight because—

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I will give way as it is the hon. Gentleman, but I am trying to conclude my remarks.

Mr. Hoyle: Why is the Conservative party suddenly showing an interest in rural post offices when, for 18 years, they were allowed to close and not an eyelid was batted?

Mrs. Browning: I do not know how many meetings the hon. Gentleman has had with sub-postmasters in his constituency—

Mr. Hoyle: Every day.

Mrs. Browning: That is part of the great Labour lie rearing its head again tonight. I am saying quite seriously that it is no good for the hon. Gentleman to make such allegations across the Floor of the House without having a substantive reason for doing so.

I have been a Member of Parliament for seven years. In those seven years, I have held two public meetings with all the sub-postmasters in my constituency, and spent a lot of time corresponding with them. I know that I am not unique; many of my colleagues do the same. It is nonsense for the hon. Gentleman to say that we are suddenly starting to take an interest in post offices. We certainly have an interest now as a result of the change of policy by the Minister and the Secretary of State.

I want to bring the House back to that—

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: As it is a Devon Member, I shall give way, but this really is the last time.

Mr. Sanders: It is a helpful intervention. Earlier, the hon. Lady mentioned the suburban fringe. Several hon. Members have spoken about the rural post office network. I should like confirmation that she sees this as a problem that affects urban areas to the same extent. By "urban areas" I mean the inner cities, seaside resorts and towns across the country. There is a danger that, in the absence of such a recognition, people will think, "It is just the rural communities again, harping on about the problems," when in fact it is a matter that should unite rural and urban areas.

Mrs. Browning: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. In my opening remarks, I mentioned the urban fringe. In the summer recess, when I visited many colleagues' constituencies, I made a point of visiting many post offices in the urban fringe. I recall visiting one in Poole, in Dorset, with my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms). Although that post office was well away from the town centre, it obviously served a very large community, many of whom were very elderly, and many of whom were so frail that they could not have taken a bus ride. I am sure that the whole House recognises the importance of such post offices.

Mr. Bercow: Would my hon. Friend allow me?

Mrs. Browning: I must make some progress; I hope that my hon. Friend will understand. With him, I visited a post office in his constituency, and he knows that it was a really excellent small village shop. The people who run it are very worried about their future—not just the post office but the shop is under threat. *[Laughter.]* Hon. Members may laugh, but it is not funny if one lives in that village.

I want to remind the House of the statement that the Secretary of State made on the Post Office in July. He said:

"Today's announcement is good news for the Post Office and all those whose livelihoods depend on it, because it can now build for the future with real confidence . . . The White Paper brings an end to the uncertainty that has dogged the Post Office over the last decade: uncertainty over its role and place in society; uncertainty over its long-term viability and ownership . . . and uncertainty over the Post Office network."—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1999; Vol. 334, c. 1175.]

Seven months later, there has never been more uncertainty about the future of the Post Office network than there is today. That is a direct result of the Government's change of policy, their dithering and their failure to look for

alternative viable policies before announcing a policy change. All that is down to the Government. This is the fourth debate that I have attended on this subject. It is about time that the Minister gave us some clear answers and ended the uncertainty.

8.36 pm

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): As the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) said at the beginning of his contribution, although concern has been expressed on both sides of the House, greater public concern about the future of the 18,000 post offices has been expressed outside the House. In my area, that concern has been fuelled by the *Western Daily Press* campaign. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) pointed out, that campaign has at times verged on scaremongering, frightening people into believing that they will lose their rural post offices within the next week.

Post offices provide a crucial service in rural areas and, as small businesses, they are vulnerable. Their number has been dwindling. The decline has already been noted to be about 1 per cent. a year over the past 20 years and that is principally due to the Tories' indecision, the Tories' neglect, the threats of privatisation and the Tories' cuts in the opening hours of rural post offices. They explain the majority of closures in those 20 years. We have now reached the stage that, if the rate of closure that went on in the Tory years in rural Gloucestershire continued, we would be left with no rural post offices by 2010.

Like many hon. Members, I have had a meeting with rural sub-postmasters. Many of the points that I wish to make echo their concerns and their fears as to what might happen to them come 2003. However, as well as their concerns, they voiced what they consider to be the opportunities and the challenges that they can meet.

In rural areas, the post office is often linked most successfully with the village shop. It is often the only centre in the rural community. In April 1998, the Government introduced a very worthwhile rebate of 50 per cent. on the council tax for a shop in a rural parish with fewer than 3,000 people if it is the only shop. That was a good move to support rural post offices. They also added in that measure the ability for a discretionary extra 50 per cent. rebate and Forest of Dean district council has offered that in response to moves from the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters.

Such extra support is very welcome in rural areas, but that local authority, which has supported post offices in the long term, has recently sent letters to people who pay their council tax over the post office counter to suggest that they might like to pay by direct debit. It says that that will be cheaper. It may be; in the short term there will be savings for the local authority. However, the change could cause long-term damage to the Post Office. If the local authority is to support rural post offices, it would have been helpful if, as well as telling those who pay at the post office that they could switch to direct debit, it had sent letters asking those who pay by direct debit whether they knew that they could pay their council tax over the post office counter.

Post offices need to have the opportunity to develop more services. For example, they could become the centre in rural areas for rural banking and for finance, insurance and many other services. They need to be multi-service centres and the Government want to develop them. In their performance and innovation unit report on the rural economy, which was published in December 1999, they said that they wanted centres of information technology, business links and a variety of other financial services to come together in one place.

The only problem that I have with the report is that there is no mention of the existing Post Office network and the financial services that are already provided, and the fact that there is a network in rural areas that could be built upon. I hope that the rural White Paper will take on board the other innovation in the performance and innovation unit report about the work of the Post Office and use the Post Office network as the basis for the multi-service centre that we want to develop to help rural economies.

I shall give the House a good example that I mentioned in the Westminster Hall debate last Wednesday, which bears repeating. Ruardean Woodside, a small village in the Forest of Dean, became one of the first of eight pilots set up in April 1999 to become an internet centre for that rural area. The hardware was provided by a grant from Gloucestershire rural community council. The kit is linked to Glosnet. People can come in and use the worldwide web and the internet. There are printers and people can send e-mail, print or fax to a range of services. It is free except for the telephone charge. It is a wonderful model of how the post office can be a centre of telecottaging activity. It stops rural isolation and helps to fight against information poverty in rural areas, to which the Government are committed.

The post office should be linked more to the local authority as a one-stop shop, where the information and the services provided by local authorities can be in the same premises. The post office is already the first point of information for many people on many issues, especially on social security and on grants that are available from local government.

Post offices have a real social function. Those who work in them know better than anybody else who is being fraudulent. They recognise the faces of those who come through the door. They will know when strangers come in and they will challenge them if they know that they are trying to cash a benefit cheque.

I know of two rural postmasters who will help families that are a bit chaotic and perhaps do not claim their child benefit. In one instance in Little Dean, the postmaster will go to the household, knock on the door and say to the family, "Do you know that you have four weeks' of child benefit owing to you?" He will do so to help the family out. That is a real social function.

Post office staff keep an eye on pensioners. They know when someone has not come in on a Thursday morning to collect his or her pension. They alert other people or they knock on the person's door to see whether he or she is all right. That is a social service that should formally be recognised and even reflected in the core payment that is given to sub-postmasters.

The Post Office network in our rural areas carries out at least 160 different services, one of which is to arrange holiday insurance, should that be wanted. Post offices used to be able to offer five different categories of insurance, including personal accident and household and earnings protection. However, the Tories stamped that out. I think that the Government should be considering reintroducing a

[Mrs. Diana Organ]

wider range of insurance services, especially in rural areas. Why not give post offices the facility to sell quantum cards for gas, electricity and water bills?

In the Forest of Dean there is poor public transport. It is being improved as a result of the Government's money for rural transport, but it is still poor. Poor people have to spend money to go to the neighbouring town to get and fill up their quantum cards. Surely it would assist people to pay promptly if quantum cards were available in post offices, particularly when we have the horizon project fully on board to help them with this facility. With smart card technology, it would be easy to accomplish.

Similarly, the post office could be used to enable people to renew their driving licence, vehicle licensing and passports. Why cannot people get a new passport form from their local rural sub-post office? During last year, when there were problems with the Passport Agency, customers were told to go to their local post offices to have their current passport extended, and thousands did so. People want to use this local facility, and it makes sense. There will then be a package provided by the post office. The passport form, the E111, travel insurance and foreign currency could all come from the local service centre, the Post Office network. Banks and travel agents can issue new passport forms, so why cannot rural sub-post offices?

I mentioned that one can get foreign currency from one's local post office. Not many people are aware of that. That is the problem with the services that post offices offer.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Does my hon. Friend and close neighbour agree that one of the fundamental problems is that sub-postmasters must sign an agreement that ties their hands and prevents them from marketing? That is certainly true of banking facilities. The agreement is so daft that they are not even allowed to put up signs in their windows to tell customers that they can cash a cheque. That must be changed.

Mrs. Organ: My hon. Friend is right; sub-postmasters do not have the time to market or advertise, they are not allowed to, and certainly do not have the resources to finance it. The Post Office and the Government need to invest in a national advertising campaign to make people aware of all the facilities available. It is difficult when there is a queue on a Thursday morning for rural sub-postmasters to tell each person at the counter, "We do this; we offer that service." They do not have the time and people do not want to hear of such services in that way. There must be a national advertising campaign.

Finally, I shall address the thorny problem that a third of Post Office business comprises benefit payments. Many people are concerned about the changes that will come into effect in 2003. I have had assurances from my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Social Security and my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness, in letters and in the debate in Westminster Hall last Wednesday, that there will be the choice of having benefits paid in cash over the counter. That will be warmly received, but what exactly does it mean? What is meant by "cash"?

Will there be the same counterfoil system as at present, or will payments be made by cheque, which must be cashed? Not everybody can get or wants a bank account. Poor pensioners do not want one and would not be able to get one, since banks would not want them as customers. An 85-year-old would find it very confusing suddenly to have to run a bank account. Such customers just want their benefits paid to them through a counterfoil system and to receive cash in their hands.

The Post Office needs effectively to become the rural banking network, which could be a benefit of the Horizon project. Several banks—the Co-operative, Lloyds, Girobank and Barclays—have already signed up to links with the Post Office. To enhance the Post Office's service provision, it is important that people use the Post Office for such banking facilities. The Post Office should become virtually a bank in its own right.

We need to identify what we can develop in the Post Office and what it can offer in future. I am not sure that there is a clear strategy for rural sub-post offices. They need help in informing people of what is available and what can be received in future. Our local post offices must provide a wide range of services. We must build up insurance, banking and financial services and link post offices, through the computerised programme, to other information services, such as that in Ruardean Woodside, making them part of a multi-service centre, with Business Links and local authority one-stop shops, so that they can truly remain at the heart of service provision in the countryside and help our rural economies.

8.48 pm

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words.

I genuinely believe that Labour Members sincerely wish to see the preservation and prosperity of the Post Office network, but I think that that is about as far as it goes. Before going any further, I should confess—perhaps confess is the wrong word—that I am one of those Members who has borne responsibility for overseeing the work of the Post Office. I was a Minister in the Department of Trade and Industry. I can admit now that I fought and lost some of the battles with the Treasury, although I am glad to say that some I won. Today, we have had a clear indication that the DTI team, personified by the Minister for Competitiveness, has lost the battle to the Treasury.

Leaving aside all the bluster and rhetoric, I have sympathy with the Minister. He is having to play a very poor hand of cards that the Treasury has dealt him.

I am committed to the modernisation of Post Office services and to the introduction of new technology to facilitate the changes, such as Horizon and ACTs, provided that both sides of the equation are in place. We have heard tonight that the second part of that equation—how those changes will be delivered—is not there.

However, three positive things have come out of the debate. First, it is good that we have had an opportunity further to discuss this matter. I have a strange feeling that we will discuss it and discuss it until eventually the Government accept that they must do something about it. They cannot allow the Minister to stonewall time after time.

Secondly, there is a benefit to the Minister, because all he need do is read into the record the speeches that he has given several times already. I have a feeling that he will be asked to come back to the House and to keep giving a

repeat performance until he is allowed to say what will happen to solve that part of the equation. I hope that when he winds up the debate he will have a go at the motion, and, I hope, erode the beautiful friendship between the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats that has existed for a number of years.

Thirdly, and more importantly, as many hon. Members have said, the motion refers to the impact that automated credit transfer will have on a large number of people. If each Parliament had to design its own coat of arms with a motto underneath, the Government would have in their design a large pencil eraser with the motto—in Latin, of course, to ensure that it is not easily understood—that in English would be, "It seemed a good idea at the time." If I had to characterise the Government's actions, I would say that to them it seemed a good idea at the time but they did not work out its long-term effect. This proposal is a classic case of, "It seemed a good idea at the time."

This measure is attractive to the Government, especially to the Treasury. We have heard that £400 million will be saved, and that is a lot of money. As has been shown time and again, there has been little recognition of the effect of the proposal on a substantial number of people who will have to use this system. The Minister is a nice chap, but nothing he has said so far reassures me that the second half of the equation is even half way towards being in place.

Mr. Letwin: I hope that my hon. Friend is not subscribing to the thesis that the net saving will be £400 million, given that we have not the slightest clue what it will be. We know only that the gross saving will be £400 million. A huge amount of unspecified money is to be paid to the banks.

Mr. Page: I ask my hon. Friend to hold his horses. As night follows day, my views will gradually unfold. Given the time, I may have to truncate my speech, but I shall touch on my hon. Friend's perfectly valid and genuine point.

It goes without saying—the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) started to make this point—that many of the people who collect their benefits from a sub-post office are among the most vulnerable—people who are old, frail and do not use information technology. For the Government to make this announcement without fully thinking through the consequences is exceedingly worrying for those people. It is difficult to understand how a Government can try to push a legitimate cost of looking after those vulnerable people on to financial institutions without clearing it with them first.

Would it not have been better to have joined-up Government—to use their oft repeated phrase? There could have been a statement by the Government and those financial institutions explaining how the system will work.

My sympathies are with the banks, because undoubtedly a number of people receiving benefit will not want or will not be able to handle this extra dimension. Automatic transfers of this kind will be welcome to Members of the House, but for a percentage of our people they will be worrying, frightening and confusing.

We all know constituents who fall into the category to which I refer. Technology may be pushing us towards a cashless society, but there is a generation to which that will never apply. I look the Minister in the eye when I say that that generation will never be able to handle it—and it is composed of the old, the frail and the vulnerable. I welcome that part of the motion, and hope that it will increase pressure on the Government to announce the second part of the equation to which I have referred.

The debate, however, extends beyond postal services. If we exclude them from what we have been discussing today, we see that they constitute only a small part of the activity of sub-post offices. What we are really considering is the possibility—indeed, the probability—that we shall create areas of potential deprivation. Deprivation is not exclusively financial, of course. I am talking about maintaining communities and services—especially in rural areas, although the same applies to constituencies on the urban fringe. The removal of such services will be the straw that breaks the back of local shops and forces them into redundancies and closure, thus hastening the death of small communities.

What will the individuals affected do? It will mean a long drive—or a bus journey, at a cost—to some larger population centre to obtain the necessities of life. To people who have lost their village store, this will become a form of social exclusion. Moreover, the Government's announcement that they will save themselves £400 million—this brings me to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin)—may well relate just to the gross figure. The Government may ultimately have to find more than that to prop up the communities that they have gone some way towards destroying.

I think that the Minister is receiving a clear message from the debate. The thousands of people who run, and work in, sub-post offices throughout the country need answers to specific questions. They want to know how the new Horizon project will affect them if 30 per cent. of their income disappears when automatic credit transfer is introduced in 2003. There are 8,000 sub-post offices in rural areas that will have to face the challenge, and several thousand more in suburban areas. It is not enough to say that they will be able to diversify—that, for instance, they can become lottery agents, if they are not lottery agents already; there is plenty of competition there. How they will survive is the great unanswered question.

I am even less convinced that the Cabinet Office performance and innovation unit will come up with convincing answers when it reports next month. Let us hope that it will, but I think all Members know that post offices and sub-post offices make a vital contribution to the vitality of their communities. We do not need the spin doctors of Whitehall who tell us what we already know, and what has been repeatedly acknowledged today.

According to what the Minister for Competitiveness told the House on 12 January, the study would reflect on how the post office network could best contribute to the Government's objectives for the future,

"and, in the process, . . . formulate objectives for the network itself."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 67WH.]

We immediately find ourselves involved in an argument, however. On the one hand, Ministers are saying that they will not become involved in the day-to-day running of the system; on the other hand, they are establishing a basic strategy and primary objectives for any organisation, which means that they must be involved in how that day-to-day running takes place.

[Mr. Page]

Like the Liberal Democrats, the Government want to have their cake and eat it. They favour automation, but they do not favour having to pick up the costs. I think that they are avoiding a good many hard choices, and I can tell the Minister that the issue will return time and again.

9 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am pleased to be called in what is our second debate within a week on this important matter. Without seeking to graduate in sycophancy, may I say that I am increasingly reassured by the replies of my hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness? I wonder whether I might mention again his renowned quotation. He said it first, I think, in Westminster Hall:

"I emphasise again that there will be no change before 2003 to existing methods of benefit payments. All benefit recipients and state pensioners who want to will continue to be able to access their benefits in cash, across the counter at the post office, both before and after the changeover."—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 69WH.]

That is a fairly convincing reply. I wavered a little when the Minister went on to say today—after he made that statement for, I think, the third time—that we would not take active measures to move customers to automated credit transfer before 2003. I am sure that he will be able to reassure hon. Members exactly what those measures might be.

If I understand the position correctly, one of the main concerns of all right hon. and hon. Members' constituents is that they will not be able to receive cash payments. That view has been expressed widely and caused much concern, particularly among elderly people, who believe that the process is in train already. The Minister was able to reassure me in Westminster Hall last week that the somewhat misleading letter on child benefit payments that was issued by the Benefits Agency had been withdrawn. I hope that further letters or statements that give the impression that there is no choice, even though there is, will cease to be issued, and that cash payment will continue to be an option. If we can resolve the cash question, that will be of great benefit to those who do not want, or cannot have, a bank account.

The second concern involves the profit margin and whether businesses can survive if a certain amount of their business goes because of direct payment, even if some of it remains via cash payment. I suspect that most of us know that village post offices are not gold mines where vast profits are made daily. People there work long hours, often in difficult circumstances—in many cases, I suspect, for quite low margins of profit. Therefore, two things need to go hand in hand; I was hoping that the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) would mention them when he talked about two stages.

Two stages need to be in harness. As my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ) eloquently mentioned, other business has to come in at the same pace as the cash-payment system declines. If that equation can be achieved, there will be a positive future for rural, suburban and inner-city post offices. Again, I am reassured—I hope that I am not over-reassured—by the Minister for Competitiveness, who indicated the Government's commitment to negotiate arrangements with the major clearing banks, so that sub-post offices become their agents.

Mr. Page: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but does he not accept how worrying it is for old people when the Government announce just one part and hope—I hope that I am wrong and that what they say will happen does happen—that the second part will follow in one, two or three years' time?

Mr. Hurst: I fully accept that there is concern. That was the reason why, in the earlier debate, I mentioned—I say it again today—that all of us have a duty to reassure our constituents in a loud and clear voice that the cash payment option will remain and that steps are being taken to reinvigorate local post services. Fear must not strangle the very businesses that we seek to save.

I will not go through the position again. We are fully aware that the post office is a crucial part of each village, suburban and inner-city community: in many cases, if the post office goes away, there will be not social exclusion but a social desert. There will be nowhere for the interchange of ideas among people because all the places for such an interchange will have gone: the pub, school, church, chapel, shop and, finally, post office.

I know that it is not the Government's intention for such social deserts to be created, and I am encouraged by Ministers' recent statements. All of us want the concept of community to survive, and believe that the post office is at the heart of the community. Again, however, I implore the Minister to ensure that the introduction of banking business and other services at post offices proceeds at the same pace as the decline of cash payments.

9.5 pm

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): Earlier in the debate, hon. Members made the point that sub-post offices are very important to local areas. Specifically, the hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ)—who is about to leave the Chamber—made various points on the issue with which I shall deal shortly.

In a very real sense, the post office is the centre of the community. However, the Government's White Paper on post offices states:

"The sub-post office plays a valuable role in local communities, particularly for the less mobile. But the Post Office cannot sustain a network if it is not sufficiently well used, and nor can Government."

Those are worrying words indeed. If there is not sufficient support for post offices, they will be at risk; indeed, in the White Paper, it is acknowledged that they are at risk. The implication of the statement is that the Government will not support sub-post offices if they are not attracting sufficient turnover. We should remember, however, the relation between the issues of benefit payment methods and possible declines in the numbers of those who use post offices.

The hon. Member for Forest of Dean made various good points—which I shall not of course, repeat—and tried to draw attention to various ways in which sub-post offices might use their position to benefit communities. She also mentioned a national advertising campaign—which is a very good idea—as a means of achieving that goal. However, as I recently told the Minister in a

Westminster Hall debate, in view of the grave confusion caused by the letter sent to benefits users, post offices should display a notice clearly stating, "You can still get your benefits here." Although I think there should be a national advertising campaign, as the hon. Lady suggested, a statement of available services should also be clearly displayed in post offices.

The Government should acknowledge their commitment to small businesses. The fact is that 90 per cent. of the sub-post office network is managed by small business people. Moreover, a recent report stated that 90 per cent. of small businesses with fewer than nine employees use sub-post offices for their banking and deposit facilities. Ministers therefore have a neat link available between establishing their commitment to small businesses and addressing the issues affecting sub-post offices.

Hon. Members have already mentioned our grave concerns for those who have decided to run sub-post offices. The Minister said that small business people had invested about £1 billion of their own money in sub-post offices. Sub-postmasters and mistresses will feel very let down in that investment, as they decided on it based on volumes of business currently being done by the post office, much of which involved benefits payments. The Government have therefore misled those who were deciding whether to take on a sub-post office about the basic business, which is now at risk.

The Minister said that the £1 billion was for an attractive investment. Sub-postmasters and mistresses clearly no longer feel that it was an attractive investment. I am sure that they have told other hon. Members that they are desperately worried that they will not get a return on their investment and will not be able to retire on a decent income. They feel let down.

That is one reason why the debate keeps recurring. It is not just because the Liberal Democrats decided to raise the subject again. Even after the debate last week, which I participated in, people are still looking for the answers. I have a great deal of time for the Minister. It has been said that he has a great struggle with the Treasury. I am sure that he is doing his best, but we want to reinforce to him what is being said about sub-post offices. The Treasury must come up with something more than the various ideas mentioned by the hon. Member for Forest of Dean, which I support.

We had a fiasco and great delays with passports recently. Sub-post offices could play a key role. With electronic communications, it should be possible to make an application at the local post office and have it near enough issued by the sub-postmaster. Photographs and forms can be transmitted electronically and it should be possible to get a passport within two or three days.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I refer the hon. Gentleman to a letter that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary placed in the Library last week in response to a question that I asked. He made it clear that the Government intend to look at the possibility of increasing facilities for passport and similar applications that are the responsibility of the Home Office.

Mr. Cotter: That is welcome, but there is a grave concern that there will not be many sub-post offices left when the reforms are introduced.

The Minister said that the Horizon project would be implemented by spring 2001. That is fine. I am glad to hear him repeating that commitment this evening. However, sub-postmasters have told me that they are not in the least impressed with the training on the computer system. That is an area of great concern and I should like the Minister to respond to it. It is all very well installing good equipment, but people who are not well acquainted with computer systems need good training.

Mr. Miller: I have followed the Horizon project in detail under the previous Administration and under this Government because of my interest in technology. There is a programme of training that involves all 19,000 sub-post office staff. At my most recent visit to ICL's Feltham operation, where Horizon is being developed, I was told that sub-postmasters, from those aged 16 to those in their 80s, had already been trained and that the target was to hit every potential sub-postmaster.

Mr. Cotter: That is very good. It is easy to say that training has been carried out, but I am questioning the quality of the training and whether it addresses what people need to know.

We are holding this debate because the Government have been reactive rather than proactive. The PIU's consideration of socially desirable objectives was referred to earlier. The Post Office White Paper could have addressed many of the issues. However, as a result of concerns that have arisen since then, the PIU has been set up. We look forward to what it will say. However, the Government seem to react too late, and to do so when people have decided not to use the post office to collect their benefits.

The Minister talked about access criteria. It is all very well to have criteria, but people may not be ready and willing to run sub-post offices because of concerns about profitability. When a sub-post office is closed now, it is difficult to find another site, as well as finding someone willing to run it. Postmasters and postmistresses are extremely concerned now—let alone in two or three years' time when it may be difficult to find staff to run sub-post offices.

I have received more letters on the issue since last week's debate. I appreciate the fact that the Minister has stayed to answer the debate, and I very much hope that he will come up with something more tangible than his initial response.

9.16 pm

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Clearly, all parties are concerned about the future of sub-post offices in urban and rural areas. However, I take issue with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), who said that everything was rosy during the 18 years of Tory Government—that was far from being the case. Let us have the facts. Some 40 post offices a week have closed over the past 20 years. There was no great debate then in this House, saying that something must be done about that haemorrhaging of rural post offices. Nothing actually happened. It is a bit rich for the hon. Lady to come to this House shedding crocodile tears about the future of the Post Office. If we believe in the future of rural post offices, we must address what went wrong before.

Part of the problem has been the modern culture of banking. Pensioners have their pensions paid automatically into their bank accounts, and people on

[Mr. Lindsay Hoyle]

child benefit have had it paid into their bank accounts. That has reduced the number of post office users, and rural post offices have suffered in particular. We ought to discuss how we can save the Post Office and reopen rural post offices.

I visit my local post offices. I was lucky enough to reopen the Chapel Lane post office in Coppull, and I have been in contact with Mrs. Foster at Wheelton post office in Chorley and Mrs. Friend at Hoghton post office, and with all the users. The belief that only Conservative Members care about post offices, after 18 years of not caring, will not wash with me.

All parties share the belief that something must be done. I have belief in the Minister, and I hope that others will. I know that the Government take the future seriously. The rural community is important to the Government, and we must ensure that the vitality of villages continues through their post offices. We ought to be embracing new technology in rural areas, as that is where the future will be. We ought to have that new technology, and bolt on additional services. It is all very well people saying that rural post offices can have a bit of this and a bit of that. They need to be able to offer full financial packages, lottery tickets, passports, tax discs and a whole range of services.

People who work hard in rural post offices and are the backbone of their community will then be rewarded financially and, crucially, will be able to sell on the business. People have been very worried about the future and have rightly questioned their Members of Parliament. I welcome that questioning and the support that we can offer. We have to tell people that we take their concerns seriously and will try to ensure that they have a bright future in which they can sell on the business when they retire.

If we do that, further post offices might reopen. There is no doubt that there was a haemorrhage, and the number of villages without a post office is significant. Thankfully, 60 per cent. of villages have a post office, although only 5 per cent. have a bank. We should consider how to encourage more post offices to open. We must ensure that we have a practical rural banking system throughout the United Kingdom.

We have a Minister who is confident that he can deliver a rural bank and ensure that those who are currently excluded from banking services are welcomed, with the promise that people will still be able to draw cash if they wish to. We must tackle social exclusion. To open an account in a high street bank in Chorley, people have to produce either a passport or a driving licence. That rules out a lot of people. We must give people the benefits of having a bank account: those services must embrace those in the rural community so that the farmer who collects money for his milk can pay it in at the local post office.

The rural banking service in the post office will be a high-tech service. We must watch out for luddism and embrace the new technology.

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman does not seem to be aware that the decision to put computers into post offices was a Conservative policy which the current Government inherited. Nobody is saying that technology is not important, but it is no good giving post offices technology, with all that it affords them, while chopping 30 per cent. off their revenue with another policy.

Mr. Hoyle: It is interesting how the Conservatives wave the flag on the last couple of years of their Government. That commitment was not delivered; it was something that they were only beginning to embrace. They are saying that, after 16 years of doing nothing, they should be congratulated on two years of being bothered about rural post offices. We will not allow them to rewrite history in that way.

The Government are trying to sort out the previous Government's mistakes and to ensure that we put in the right technology. We have the right Minister to do it. We should welcome the fact that the Government have assured the future of our rural and urban post offices.

9.23 pm

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I have heard some rewriting of history, but the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) takes the biscuit. I listened with interest to his speech.

The Minister drew attention to the number of times we have discussed the Post Office since July, with a full day's debate inspired by the official Opposition, a half-day debate inspired by the Liberal Democrats and a debate last week in Westminster Hall. I once had responsibility for the Post Office. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) and I have been trying to recall the number of times that we discussed the Post Office—there was certainly a major debate on it when we presented our Green Paper—but I cannot recall a time when we had to hold a debate because of the closure and the threat of closure of sub-post offices. If such threats had existed, the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats would have shouted the need for debates from the rooftops. The very fact that such debates were not requested is evidence of how carefully we considered the future of the rural post office network, so I will take no lectures from the Government today.

I accept the Minister's commitment to the Post Office and I readily acknowledge that he has a record unmatched by previous Post Office Ministers. However, I wish to raise several points that I hope he will address when he winds up. Today's debate is not about the Post Office and the delivery of letters: it is about the sub-post office network and 18,000 privately operated businesses. Those businesses provide a vital lifeline, especially in rural areas. There is no doubt that the post office remains the most attractive element in the village retail structure. It is invariably located with integrated village shops. Rural community sub-post offices provide essential services for those confined to the village for whatever reason. The sub-post office is a critical element of village shop owners' financial plans.

In my constituency, West Derbyshire, which covers a huge rural area, I am concerned about how many closures have taken place in the past few years. For example, post offices have closed in Cubley, Longford, Roston, Flagg, Lea Bridge, Knifton, Quarndon, Fenny Bentley, Clifton and Taddington. That is a massive escalation of closures. Of course closures take place over time when someone has run a post office for a long time and wishes to retire, and it is always very difficult for them to find someone

else to take the post office on. However, I believe that Post Office Counters is partly responsible for that situation.

I was so concerned about the future of the sub-post office network that I did a survey of all the post offices in my constituency last year. I thought that Cubley post office was still open—until I received a letter back from Mrs. Wilton of 4 Long Meadow, Cubley, who closed the post office. She said:

"I did manage to find another person in the village keen to take on the running of the P.O. in her home. She was informed by Post Office Counters that she would have to install an alarm, she would be responsible for insuring the equipment and would have to pay the running costs estimated at £22 per month, this out of a gross salary of £135 per month. Obviously her enthusiasm evaporated!

My personal view, and I stress personal, is that P.O.C.L. say they do not close Post Offices but are more than happy to have it done for them."

A further issue arises from the contract that people are required to sign before they take on a post office. A new sub-post office could have opened in Idridgehay, when some new people took over the village shop in which the post office used to be located. However, they found the requirements to which they had to sign up too burdensome. On top of the money that would have to be spent on decorating the outside of the shop in the corporate colours, as the Post Office insists on, the last sentence of the contract they were sent caused them great concern:

"At the time of your resignation your successor will be appointed at your premises"—

let us remember that people run these businesses in their own homes—

"unless the Regional Manager has stated that he wishes to close or reinstate the office on vacancy or no acceptable candidate can be found to take over the appointment in your existing premises".

Village post offices are often run from home. Who is likely to sign a contract that allows the Post Office to put someone else in a person's home to run the local service?

Rightly or wrongly, many people in rural areas believe that the network of village post offices is under threat. The evidence in my constituency leads me to agree. That threat is not in the interests of the Government or the country, so I hope that the Minister will encourage a new approach from Post Office Counters. For example, why are carriers in competition with Parcelforce not allowed to operate through the post office system? Why do not the Government open up the services provided by village post offices?

The Minister has a golden opportunity to make the progress that many hon. Members have attempted over a number of years. I hope that he will take it, and secure the future of our vital village post office network. If he manages to help that network, he will ensure the survival of offices in the other, urban areas mentioned by other hon. Members in this debate.

9.32 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I make no apology for holding yet another debate on the Post Office. The network of sub-post offices, and the services that can be accessed through them, are vital to our rural and urban communities. We have had to return to the subject because so many questions were left unanswered. I hope that they will be answered tonight: if they are not, I predict that there will be further debates on the subject until they are answered.

The Minister has temporarily gone from his place, after being present for the whole debate. Excellent though he is, the Minister is working overtime, thanks to a shortage of other Ministers to deal with this matter.

Mr. Page: When the news is good, the Secretary of State is present: when the news is bad, someone else is.

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman speaks from experience.

Mr. Baker: My short experience in the House leads me to believe that what the hon. Gentleman says is true.

We have heard that Britain still has more than 18,000 post offices, despite the closures that have taken place at an alarming rate over the past 20 years. Those offices serve 28 million people every week.

Under the Conservative Government, 4,000 sub-post offices closed. That decline has continued under Labour. Offices close every week, yet we know how important they are to rural communities and to estates in urban areas. Often they are the only community services left when the school, the pub and the other shops are long gone.

We also heard how important benefit payments are to postal business. The Post Office expressed its concern about the Government's policy trend in a press release issued on 8 July 1999:

"The DSS's decision to pay benefits by Automated Credit Transfer from 2003 . . . would seriously threaten the income streams of many post offices, especially in rural areas."

That is the fact of the matter. It is why so many hon. Members are worried that the Government's plans will undermine the economics of the post office system, and lead to closures.

The share of income for post offices deriving from the payment of benefits averages between 30 and 40 per cent., but it can be as high as 70 per cent. in some offices.

In my constituency of Lewes, more than 40 per cent. of the income of eight out of the 34 post offices derives from the payment of benefits. In the Secretary of State's constituency of Tyneside, North, where there are 22 post offices, 16—73 per cent. of them—depend on benefit payments for more than 40 per cent. their income. In the Prime Minister's constituency, 72 per cent. of post offices are so dependent. Interestingly, in Edinburgh, Central, the constituency of the Secretary of State for Social Security, only 5 per cent. of post offices are in danger of closing down, which is fortunate.

The Minister talked about an unhealthy reliance on benefits. In one sense, I can understand that—it does not do to put all one's eggs in one basket. Nevertheless the word "unhealthy" suggests that the Minister believes that dependence on benefits should be reduced, but is not yet clear what will replace it. That point concerns many Liberal Democrat colleagues and, I believe, hon. Members across the House. It seems that benefits will be taken away—that much is clear—but what will replace them is not at all clear.

How great is the Government's commitment to the network? What is their commitment to the vital lifeline that rural post offices in particular provide? The Minister

[Mr. Baker]

talked about access criteria, but it is not clear how they will link with the financial performance of a post office. If a post office is vital for a community because the nearest one to it is a long way away, will it survive because it performs an important function for the local community, no matter how unsuccessful it is financially? Or will it have to close because it is not financially viable, even though people will be inconvenienced? We need to understand the relationship between the social factors and the economic performance of each post office.

I have doubts about the appeals procedure, and I hope that the Minister can reassure me when he winds up the debate. The new appeals procedure sounds like a good idea, but it is not clear how it will deal with even the present volume of sub-post offices that are closing, never mind an increased volume if things go awry. Nor is it clear whether it will be based on simply financial criteria. If so, what is the point of an appeal? It will just be argued that the figures do not stack up and that the post office must shut.

We need to have clear and rigorous social guidelines in place that can overrule the financial performance of each unit. Post offices will be doing the best they can under the circumstances—it may not make financial sense, but it will make social sense. The Minister will have to clarify that point if we are to have confidence in the appeals procedure.

The Minister said that people must use their post office or lose it—we have heard that phrase many times. But what about those who have to use it because there is no alternative, but who still might lose it because it is not making money? Where do those people go when their sub-post offices close? The Minister said that there can be no guarantee that no post office will shut. The hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) spoke about people's individual circumstances and the difficulty of replacing postmasters. Of course that is true. But we want the Government's guarantee that except for those personal circumstances, they will maintain the network at or at about its present size. I have not heard the Minister give that guarantee—I hope that he will tonight. If not, what is the minimum size of the network that he is prepared to tolerate? It is currently 18,000—how low will it have to go before he says that it has gone too far?

The Minister mentioned that there is a small window of opportunity. The hon. Gentleman told us again tonight that automation will take place by spring 2001. We are pleased that the Government are pushing forward with automation. We know that ACT kicks in in 2003. That is not a very long time in which, to use the Minister's words, to grow new business. What happens if post offices do not grow new business in that two-year period?

The Minister praised the contribution of the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), who was not called to speak in the debate tonight but who secured the debate last week in Westminster Hall. The hon. Gentleman said: "it would be good to hear that, even with the introduction of ACT, the timetable of 2003 to 2005 is flexible".—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 49WH.]

The Minister should respond to that sound point. A question remains over the consequences of a mass take-up of use of the internet or new digital facilities. Will automation render the sub-post offices out of date? The key question remains: how far will the financial performance of each unit outweigh social factors?

Considerable doubts remain about franchise arrangements in urban areas. Post Office Counters seems determined to leave perfectly good offices so that it can enter into franchise arrangements with retailers. However, in Newhaven, Post Office Counters left a perfectly good and serviceable Crown office—near the sorting office, which was in the same building—to move in with a retailer that soon went bankrupt. At three days' notice, the post office had to move into a portable cabin in a car park, which the disabled find it difficult to use. Meanwhile, the original Crown office lies empty. That kind of mess results when Post Office Counters refuses to go it alone when necessary, preferring to reach franchise agreements with partners that often seem fairly dubious.

In Lewes, the franchise post office does nearly as much business as the Crown post office—about two thirds or three quarters as much. The franchise post office has been given notice by W. H. Smith, and will close in three months' time. The Crown office is at the top of a hill, which is impossible to reach for the elderly and disabled. No alternative arrangement has been made. Post Office Counters does us no favours by reaching such franchise agreements. Why do the agreements include such short notice periods? Why should people's lives be disrupted without notice because of those agreements? We need confidence that Post Office Counters is as keen to maintain the network as Members of Parliament are.

Questions remain about cash transactions. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) asked how much they will cost, and who will pay. Will the banks suffer a loss? Will the Post Office? Will the Treasury suffer a loss, or the Department of Social Security?

Mrs. Browning: The hon. Gentleman will agree that banks tend not to suffer losses. I fear that if banks are not properly reimbursed, they will pass on the costs to their customers, which would be totally unacceptable.

Mr. Baker: The hon. Lady makes a valid point.

The hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ), who is no longer here—

Mrs. Organ: I am.

Mr. Baker: I beg the hon. Lady's pardon. She asked what cash is. That seems a simple question, but does cash include cheques? All sorts of fears surround that point. Many people do not want a bank account and want no truck with the banking system. They want to hand over a book and receive cash in return. Successive Governments have ensured that child benefit is paid in cash to women for the very good reason that it ensures that children are properly supported. We must now allow such money to be sucked into paying off overdrafts on bank accounts, or to go into joint bank accounts held with unsuitable husbands.

On 23 October 1999, a form was issued relating to child benefit. It lists the ways in which child benefit may be paid. It says that the benefit may be paid straight into a bank or building society account every four weeks, or through the Post Office by payment into a giro account or national savings bank account. The form does not mention cash payments over the counter. Will the Minister write to everyone who has received the form to make them

aware that they can receive cash over the counter, or will he allow the form to let people believe mistakenly that they cannot receive child benefit in cash?

The Liberal Democrats favour a fully automated, modernised, competitive, publicly owned Post Office, operating with greater commercial freedom. *[Interruption.]* There should be no surprise about that; it has been our position for a long time.

We are in favour of the maintenance of universal service provision, with national uniform tariffs, which especially benefit rural and remote areas. We are in favour of real customer choice, through the retention of alternative payment options for benefits and the postponement of ACT for benefits until we are convinced that such arrangements will guarantee the network in its current state. We are in favour of a proper appeals system, so as to ensure that it is extremely difficult to close post offices. We are in favour of ensuring the survival of the post office network in its present form, with the present number of post offices, for those people—the majority—who want it.

We have used one of our rare Opposition Days to hold the debate because the matter is so important. We have held four debates on the subject recently, in this place or in Westminster Hall, because it is so important and because of the uncertainty of the Government's response. The Minister has not quelled the many genuine doubts of many Liberal Democrat, Conservative and Labour Members. During the next 15 minutes, it is up to the Minister to answer our questions or be faced with another debate in the not too distant future.

9.46 pm

Mr. Alan Johnson: With the leave of the House, I shall conclude the debate.

The debate has been wide ranging and, as in the debate last week, the amount of participation by hon. Members reflects the importance of the matter to them and to their constituents in urban and in rural areas. Hon. Members have raised many specific issues and expressed many concerns, to which I shall respond.

First, I reiterate the Government's firm commitment to the protection of postal services for all customers now and in the future. Although much the focus of the debate has been on the future of the counters network, its subject extends to other vital facets of the Post Office's operation—the provision of letter and parcel services.

In my opening speech, I dealt with the balanced package of reforms, set out in the White Paper, to enable the Post Office to meet the major challenges that it faces in a rapidly changing communications market. Key elements to underpin the Post Office's crucial social obligations include the enshrining in law for the first time of the universal service obligation of daily mail deliveries to every postal address in the country and of the uniform domestic letter tariff—a matter of special relevance and importance in rural areas.

We shall establish a new independent regulator, the Postal Services Commission, to promote and protect customer interests. We shall set a high quality of service standards; regulate prices; promote competition; and strengthen consumer representation through a revamped Post Office Users National Council. We provided additional financial resources to the Post Office for investment by reducing the proportion of post-tax earnings to be paid to the Government. We have a commitment to a nationwide network of post offices and to the setting of access criteria, against which the evolution of the network can be closely monitored and under which ways of maintaining reasonable access can be investigated.

Hon. Members have raised a wide range of issues. I shall respond to as many of them as I can. However, first I admit that the Government make no pretence of being able to answer every question at present. The study of the post office network by the performance and innovation unit at the Cabinet Office was commissioned by the Prime Minister last October. That was before any campaigns by rural newspapers and even before any Adjournment debates had been held on the matter—apart from one honourable exception, initiated by a Liberal Democrat Member. It is expected that the report will be completed in the spring. It will inform our thinking on setting the future objectives, role and contribution of the network and on setting access criteria.

The performance and innovation unit will closely examine issues related to the migration of benefits to ACT.

Mrs. Browning: I am sure that the House is delighted that the Prime Minister has taken that personal interest. Can the Minister promise us that, when the report is available, the Prime Minister will stand at the Dispatch Box and present it to the House?

Mr. Johnson: No, I cannot. However, I can assure the hon. Lady that there will be a debate on the contents of the report.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) tabled a short motion. I can clarify the issues that it raises. It is based on a false premise.

First, the motion says that changes by the Government

"will lead to further large scale closures".

At the start of the debate, I and other hon. Members pointed out that, in whipping up such concern, the Liberal Democrats are devaluing the properties of some sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses and creating the very circumstances that all hon. Members are determined to avoid.

The motion says that ACT

"will deny freedom of choice".

It will not. Any benefit recipient who wants to continue to draw their benefit payment in cash across a post office counter before and after the changes will be able to do so.

The motion asks the Government to postpone ACT

"until the Post Office has developed its own automated platform".

The Post Office will have developed its own automated platform by spring 2001. The migration to ACT will not even start until 2003.

The motion says that, as part of the universal service obligation, we are to

"require Post Office Counters to maintain a sub-post office network which satisfies broad social and economic as well as narrow financial criteria of viability."

We have said that we will enshrine access criteria in law for the first time and ensure that an independent regulator and a revamped consumer body have the obligation to

[Mr. Johnson]

police them. I do not doubt that the hon. Member for Twickenham and the Liberal Democrats have people's best interests at heart, but we really must be careful about the messages that are sent about the post office network.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) spoke about the deal that we inherited from the previous Government. As I have said before, the benefit payment card system proposed by the previous Government was well intentioned. They sought to computerise the network. To draw an analogy with television programmes, I would prefer to talk about "Tomorrow's World" than about "All Our Yesterdays", but that particular private finance initiative was based on the developer also being the financier. Anyone who reads the report of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry will agree that we had no alternative but to pull out of that contract and to set up a new computerisation contract that was capable of being achieved.

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Trade and Industry Committee received evidence to the effect that the recouping of the costs of the establishment of the ICL Pathway project—Project Horizon—would probably amount to more than 73p per transaction, for an almost indefinite period? That seemed to me a crazy contract.

Mr. Johnson: The point is well made.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton raised a point about transaction costs. That is a matter for commercial negotiation between the DSS, the Benefits Agency and the banks, and between the Post Office and the banks, but I believe that she is aware that even the benefit payment card proposed by the previous Government related to an eight-year contract with the Benefits Agency, which ran out in 2005. They made it perfectly clear—I had an interest in the matter at the time—that it was an interim measure on the route to ACT; it was not a for ever solution to the problem.

The hon. Lady will also know that the cost of girocheques is 79p per payment, the cost of payment for the benefit payment card was 67p per payment, the cost of the order book control system that we are using at the moment—the bar coded system—is 49p and the cost of ACT is 1p. Given that information technology is becoming more ubiquitous, the migration to ACT is bound to continue, no matter which Government are in power.

By holding this debate yet again, we are at last having a debate about the future of the Post Office. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) said, year after year seeped away with no one showing any particular political interest in the subject.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton mentioned lottery tickets, with derision. We are not saying that the increase in lottery payments is a panacea for the problem. We are saying that it is very welcome new work to pass across post office counters.

My hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mrs. Organ), in a very important speech, drew attention to the crucial fact that we do not advertise the services that are available across post office counters. She mentioned 160 transactions. There are actually 170; and, with computerisation, every office in the country will be able to provide every service. At the moment, some offices in rural areas are restricted in the services that they can provide because of the difficulty of training staff in 170 transactions. We need to deal with that issue.

My hon. Friend mentioned the performance and innovation unit report on rural areas and said that it did not mention the Post Office network. She also made that point last week and I shall write to her about it. The PIU team is offended by her comment. It says that there is a complete chapter on the network in the report, so I shall deal with that point in correspondence. My hon. Friend also raised some excellent ideas on how we could increase traffic across post office counters.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) said that I had been dealt a poor hand by the Treasury and that I had to do something about it. He was a member of a Government under whom the Treasury screwed the Post Office for £1 billion over 10 years. They attracted stern criticism from the Tory-dominated Select Committee on Trade and Industry. The right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) said that that system would stop and that they would introduce a dividend system based on 40 per cent. of pre-tax profits. Three months later, a Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer hiked the external financing limit to £1 billion over three years, and the hon. Gentleman tells me that this Government have been dealt a poor hand by the Treasury.

My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) said that we needed to take active measures and he referred to the Benefits Agency letter, as did the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) in his wind-up speech. We are in contact with the Benefits Agency about the letter that was sent to the 370,000 of the 7.5 million child benefit recipients who get their payments weekly. Since 1982, the system has been that child benefits are paid monthly unless someone meets certain criteria. It is a regular procedure for the Benefits Agency to write to the minority who still receive weekly payments to remind them of the criteria. The Department has concerns about the absence of certain words in that letter. The matter has been taken up with the Benefits Agency and, as I have said before, we are working with it in complete partnership to ensure that any misunderstanding caused by the letter is eradicated and so that people understand—I say it again—that they have the right to draw benefits in cash.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) also referred to struggles with the Treasury. I have mentioned the struggles that the previous Government had, and we are having an easy time compared to them. Over the past few months, the Treasury has agreed to the Post Office keeping more of its money. The external financing limited was 50 per cent. last year and it will be 40 per cent. in future years. By putting £480 million of investment into the computerisation of the network, the Treasury has done a great deal to lift the dead hand that has fallen on the Post Office from across the road at the Treasury buildings since at least the time of Rowland Hill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chorley made a profound point about the erosion of the network over the past few years. I am sorry to surprise and shock the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), but I thought that he made an excellent contribution. It recognised that we have problems with closures now and some of those problems are about the relationship

between Post Office Counters and sub-postmasters, who must be part of any meaningful review to protect the network. I am sorry to ruin the hon. Gentleman's career, but he also mentioned what I seem to remember was called "reciprocal exclusivity", which is being considered by the PIU.

This has been an important debate. I acknowledge that we do not yet have detailed answers to all the questions that have been raised, but we are fully alive to them. We are already working on them and will continue to do so in the coming months. As in many facets of national life, the world in which the Post Office and postal services operate is changing rapidly. We will provide the protection for this vital part of the social fabric of this country and we will ensure that post offices are given the resources that they need to survive in very difficult circumstances. I urge the House to support the Government amendment.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 43, Noes 298.

Division No. 28] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Bob Russell and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael

Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 286, Noes 41.

Division No. 29] **[10.11 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew

McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Bob Russell and
Mr. Andrew Stunell.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MADAM SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House "welcomes the fact that the Government will be introducing a Bill to modernise the Post Office; notes the contrast with years of Tory inaction, that left the Post Office to decline; welcomes the reduction of the External Financing Limit and the ability to borrow which will boost the Post Office's ability to invest for the future, welcomes for the first time the clear commitment of the Government to a network throughout the United Kingdom of post offices which will be automated, and to introduce for the first time criteria for access to Post Office services; welcomes the fact that for the first time the Universal Service Obligation will be guaranteed in legislation; welcomes the study by the Performance and Innovation Unit which is looking at the future of the network; and notes that the policies of the Opposition would undoubtedly lead to the decline of the Post Office."

10.22 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. This follows the point of order that was raised by the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) this afternoon. I understand from the media this evening that, despite the dangerously unstable situation in Indonesia and the failure to make any progress on the release of East Timorese refugees who are still in West Timor, the Government have taken the arms embargo off Indonesia. I wish that the Minister would come to the House to make a statement to hon. Members, instead of announcing it on the media.

Madam Speaker: Perhaps I could refer the hon. Lady to a question that was tabled on Friday for answer today, on the status of the European Union arms embargo on Indonesia. She might like to follow that through. Meanwhile, I am sure that, yet again, the Government Front-Bench team will have noted the concern of hon. Members in many parts of the House on the issue.

POLITICAL PARTIES, ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS BILL

Ordered,

That Standing Committee G be discharged from considering Part I (the Electoral Commission) and Part VII (Referendums) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill and any new Clauses or new Schedules relating to those Parts, and that those Parts of the Bill, and such new Clauses and new Schedules, be committed to a Committee of the whole House;

That, when the provisions of the Bill considered respectively by the Committee of the whole House and by the Standing Committee have been reported to the House, the Bill be proceeded with as if the Bill had been reported as a whole from the Standing Committee.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Sandra Gregory

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

10.23 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Although Sandra Gregory was arrested almost seven years ago, it is the first time that her case has been raised in the House. The reason is that a process has been going on for the past seven years, but that appears now to be stalled. It is necessary for the House to address that. A number of hon. Members have supported the case, particularly the hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), who has said that she would have been here if she had not been away on other business. She and I have together raised the matter with Ministers.

I remind the House that Sandra Gregory was arrested on 3 February 1993 at Bangkok airport and found to be in possession of 89 g of heroin in condoms that were secreted internally. She claimed that she was carrying the heroin on behalf of an acquaintance, Robert Locke, for a payment of £1,000, to be used for her fare back to the United Kingdom. The Thai authorities were apparently tipped off by the British embassy that Locke was suspected of drug trafficking, although it had no knowledge of Sandra Gregory. In the event, she was clearly compromised with undeniable possession.

Locke pleaded not guilty, and, with only Sandra's evidence against him, was acquitted—although, ironically, he was convicted of being in possession of heroin while in prison in Thailand and sentenced to three years. He has also been convicted of a heroin offence since his return to the United Kingdom.

Sandra had no option but to plead guilty, and was subsequently sentenced to a mandatory minimum sentence of 25 years. Sandra's offence was attempting to export drugs. Had she been caught with that amount—89 g—within Thailand, it would not have been an offence as it was under 100 g, which is the limit of what is regarded as being for personal use. The current street value of the drug is about £9,000.

Sandra was not motivated by greed—she was not planning to sell the drug or realise its value. She was accepting payment for acting as what is known in the trade as a mule. It was not, as some people have suggested, an act of greed but an act of irrational desperation by a sick and homesick young woman.

As it was a mandatory minimum sentence, mitigating circumstances were not considered. However, at the time of the offence, Sandra Gregory was suffering from dengue fever and amoebic dysentery, had lost more than 25 per cent. of her body weight and was desperate to get back to the United Kingdom. She was, in her mother's words,

"not really in her right mind".

Neither Sandra nor her parents—Stan and Doreen, who live in my constituency—deny that an offence was committed, or that Sandra should have been punished. The issue is entirely one of proportionality.

Under the Thai judicial system, the normal process of appealing for someone in Sandra's position is through an appeal to the King. Sandra was able to initiate that process only after conviction, which was delayed for three years, pending the outcome of Robert Locke's trial.

Sandra is now completing the seventh year of her sentence, and still does not know when her appeal to the King will be considered. She was told that it would be before Christmas, then in the new year. The latest information is that it may not be for another six months which, in itself, is an added frustration.

The Government maintain that it is not policy to support clemency appeals for British nationals under foreign jurisdictions other than in exceptional cases, which seems to mean cases involving, for example, the terminal illness of the prisoner or a next of kin. United Kingdom practice, however, seems to differ very sharply from the practice of other Governments and does not even seem to be consistently applied by our own Government.

If Sandra Gregory were an Australian, she would receive automatic Government support for a clemency appeal. If Sandra were an American, she would have her sentence reduced to take account of time spent in a Thai prison. The Americans multiply Thai prison years by six. Therefore, Sandra's three years spent in a jail in Bangkok would have been regarded as 18 years in the American system, so that she would have been immediately eligible for parole on her return home and would now have been deemed to have served the entire sentence without remission.

The Dutch Government review the sentence of those who are transferred from conviction under foreign jurisdiction back to Holland against the domestic equivalent sentence. In Sandra's case, her sentence would have been a maximum of four years.

Since her return to the United Kingdom, Sandra has spent time in Holloway, Wakefield, and Durham maximum security wing, and she is currently at Cookham Wood, in Kent. She is serving the third longest sentence of any woman in a United Kingdom prison, with only Myra Hindley and Rosemary West serving longer sentences—life meaning life in both cases. While Sandra Gregory was in Durham, she was in the same wing as Rosemary West, and certainly felt great resentment that she was treated as being the same category of criminal.

The effect has been that Sandra Gregory—a first-time offender who bitterly regrets her crime and is repentant—has seen professional criminals, with a serious track record of serious crimes, come in and out of prison while she continues to languish.

A little over a year after Sandra's arrest, another British woman was arrested in Bangkok, trying to export 7 kg of heroin. On conviction, she was sentenced to life imprisonment. That sentence was reduced on appeal to 35 years and then to 25 years in a general amnesty. Recently, her appeal to the King for clemency, which has been heard even though she was arrested more than a year after Sandra Gregory, resulted in her sentence being reduced to 10 years. That appeal was apparently supported by United Kingdom Customs and Excise. How is that consistent with the Government's stated policy? The reason given to me was that she gave evidence leading to the conviction of other drug dealers. She is now eligible for parole, although she and her family are in such danger that they will have to find new identities. Patricia Hussain, the woman in question, had previous convictions for theft, fraud and prostitution and was carrying not 89 g of heroin, but 7 kg.

I have no doubt that Sandra Gregory, who met Patricia Hussain when they were in prison in Thailand, wishes her well, but she would not be human if she did not feel that

there was some difference in approach. When Sandra's parents and I asked the Foreign Office for an explanation, Nicolette Smith of the consular division said in a letter on 30 November:

"Consular confidentiality precludes my commenting on Patricia Hussain's situation."

I hope that the Minister might feel able to explain how the difference can be justified. It cannot be justice that someone convicted for a far more serious offence should get Government agency support and now be eligible for release while Sandra Gregory faces another four years before becoming eligible for parole.

Sandra's parents, Stan and Doreen, have supported their daughter throughout and worked for a fair assessment of her sentence. They have behaved with great dignity and quiet determination. They hurt to see her mood swings, and the prime years of her life wasting away. I participated in a live television programme with them in Aberdeen yesterday. They were not told in advance that there would be a video at the start of the programme showing Sandra's arrest and conviction and her obvious distress and resentment. I have nothing but respect for their ability to argue their case rationally in such circumstances.

In the past year, Stan and Doreen Gregory have sought and won support for Sandra's application for clemency from a wide cross-section of people. They have received the backing of the Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland and the Episcopal Church of Scotland. They have had the support of 35 Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops, including one archbishop. Fifty seven Members of Parliament from all parties, including former Cabinet Ministers, have signed a motion calling on the Government to support her appeal to the King. More than 30 Members of the Scottish Parliament have backed a similar motion. Many others have given public or private support.

I am as aware as any Member of Parliament of the seriousness of drugs crimes. I support the need for tough penalties, especially for traffickers, which Sandra Gregory was not. However, that does not mean that the normal rules of justice can be set aside. Sandra Gregory is as much a victim of drugs as many others. While she faces the prospect of at least another four years in jail before she is even eligible for parole, the serious dealers go free to carry on their trafficking. They have the power to escape while minnows such as Sandra Gregory are left to take the rap.

What assurances can the Minister give Sandra's family that the lack of British Government support for her appeal to the King will not prejudice her chances? Is that lack of support already contributing to the continuing delay in her appeal being heard? Does the Minister know why the delay has occurred and when a final hearing and adjudication will be carried out? What firm assurances can be given that the delay will not continue indefinitely? Will the Government make it clear, respectfully, to the King of Thailand that there is widespread support in the UK for Sandra's sentence to be reviewed and reduced?

Will the Government convey to the King the fact that lack of support is an issue of general policy, and does not mean that the British Government do not believe that there may be a strong case for clemency? Can the Minister deny, on the basis of the treatment of nationals of countries other than the UK and the outcome of the Hussain appeal, that it would now be appropriate for Sandra Gregory's sentence to be reduced to 10 years or less, making her now eligible for parole?

Sandra Gregory should be punished. She is being punished. Her parents are being punished. Is it not now time for mitigating circumstances to be fully considered? Should not her punishment be compared with her offence and the punishment of others? Is it not now disproportionate? Indeed, may her parents be right in believing that it may be in breach of the European convention on human rights? Does the Minister understand the hurt and offence—expressed to me yesterday—caused to Stan and Doreen Gregory by seeing Kosovo war criminals, who have been convicted of systematic cold-blooded mass murder, getting lighter sentences than their daughter? Are not these fair comparisons? Is not the Government in danger of unfairness and inconsistency?

Sandra Gregory is paying dearly for her crime. She should not be made a scapegoat for those who are not.

10.37 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) for bringing this matter to the attention of the House and for putting some pertinent questions and powerful arguments, of which I am sure the Thai authorities will take note. I am glad of the opportunity to tell the House of the interest that the Government have shown in Sandra Gregory's case.

I also wish to take this opportunity to outline our review of policy on making representations in support of pleas for clemency by British prisoners abroad to the authorities of the countries where they are detained.

The Government are steadfastly committed to tackling serious crime, including drug smuggling. We co-operate with other countries in this, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Just because a drug criminal is British is no excuse—there should be no more leniency than for other nationals committing similar crimes. British nationals detained abroad are subject to local jurisdiction wherever they commit their crimes. We respect the right of other countries to decide their own sentencing guidelines in accordance with their laws, customs and culture—just as we would ask them to do for us.

As the hon. Gentleman said, Sandra Gregory was arrested at Bangkok international airport in February 1993, when 86.9 grammes of heroin were found concealed inside her body. She pleaded guilty to drug trafficking, and was sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment. This is an extremely long sentence by British standards, although it was reduced in 1996 by two years in His Majesty the King of Thailand's golden jubilee amnesty.

On 5 June 1997, Sandra transferred to a British prison under the terms of the UK-Thailand prisoner transfer agreement. I should point out to the hon. Gentleman that Australia does not have a prisoner transfer agreement, which is why there is a different situation for that country. The move greatly facilitates visits from her family, and allows her to be in an English-speaking environment—albeit in the difficult circumstances to which the hon. Gentleman has drawn the attention of the House—with the same rights and privileges as other British prisoners. She will become eligible for parole in 2003. She may also benefit from any further general reduction in sentences in future amnesties by His Majesty the King of Thailand.

[Mr. Peter Hain]

In May 1997, Sandra submitted her royal pardon petition to His Majesty the King of Thailand. She wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 10 June 1997, asking him to give official support to her royal pardon petition. Our policy at the time was to support petitions only when there were compelling compassionate circumstances—for example, where a prisoner was terminally ill and unlikely to survive their sentence, or where a relative was terminally ill and their death would leave elderly relatives, or young children with no-one to care for them.

Sandra was 29 at the time of her arrest and had lived in Thailand for more than 18 months. She knew how tough the Thai laws on drugs were. She admitted that she had agreed to carry the drugs for an acquaintance and for financial gain. She was in good health, with no dependent relatives. After consideration, we declined to support Sandra's plea because there were insufficient compassionate or humanitarian reasons. She did not qualify for support under the policy that I have outlined.

Mr. Bruce: Does the Minister consider that suffering from dengue fever and amoebic dysentery and having lost 25 per cent. of one's bodyweight is good health? Are not those mitigating circumstances that a clemency appeal could consider?

Mr. Hain: That will be taken into account, and was noted at the time.

Since that time, Sandra Gregory's parents—I pay tribute to them—have urged us consistently to reverse our decision because they believe that Sandra's sentence is disproportionately long by comparison with the sentence that she would have received in the United Kingdom for a similar conviction, which is undoubtedly the case. They have organised an effective campaign, gaining support from Members of Parliament, Members of the Scottish Parliament, members of the public and the Church.

Sandra accepts that what she did was wrong and she is sorry. I have every sympathy for Mr. and Mrs. Gregory; as a parent, I would probably have done the same had one of my children been in this predicament; I admire their efforts and the dignified way in which they have conducted their campaign.

In the light of that, in March 1999 we began a review of our policy on making representations about the convictions and sentencing of British prisoners abroad to the authorities of the countries where they are detained. We focused particularly on support for clemency pleas. The review was a complex exercise and took a long time.

There are more than 2,000 British prisoners overseas. We identified 243 prisoners serving sentences of at least five years in countries where there are clemency schemes; 93 of them were in Thailand and 21 in Morocco. We found that we could not discriminate among them, or even prioritise their clemency pleas.

Disregarding the drug offenders would not help Sandra. Supporting all the pleas for pardons simultaneously would damage our credibility and severely limit the chances of success for any of the pleas. Even if we were to reduce the list to prisoners with sentences of at least 10 years we would still have 142 potential pleas to consider.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): Does the Minister accept that even if there are 2,000 other prisoners, to have this British young Lady serving this sentence in a British jail is an exceptional circumstance, especially given the disquiet in Gordon, throughout Scotland and in the House?

Mr. Hain: It is a troubling circumstance. That is why I am grateful that the matter has been raised.

Some prisoners have argued that overseas penal and judicial systems do not always take account of mitigating circumstances and that the Government should therefore also support pleas for early release if the prisoners have received a much longer sentence than they might have done in the UK, as Sandra Gregory's case shows, but just as we would not accept other countries seeking to determine our laws and customs, we must accept their right to decide sentencing guidelines in accordance with their laws, customs and culture. The guidelines often reflect strong political pressures to impose deterrent sentences to dissuade others from making a bad drugs problem any worse.

Our policy on official support for pardon applications was already in line with that operated by Her Majesty's Prison Service. Early release of foreign prisoners in the UK on compassionate grounds is covered by section 36 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. In general, the circumstances looked for by the Prison Service are terminal illness of the prisoner; terminal illness and/or death of a spouse when there will be no one to care for the children; and when there is no one to care for a terminally ill parent.

If we accept other countries' rights to sentence as they wish, that we do not intervene in that judicial process and that our policy on supporting clemency pleas abroad is in line with our policy at home, it follows that we have little scope for modifying our policy.

We have looked at the issue from every angle, but we could not look at Sandra's case in isolation. After very careful consideration and taking all factors into account, we decided not to change our policy on supporting clemency pleas. Our primary concern was to ensure that the policy should be based on clear and objective criteria. We decided that that was best achieved by the existing guidelines—only supporting clemency pleas when there were certain clear compassionate grounds to do so. That unfortunately means that we were not able to support Sandra's plea for clemency.

British nationals detained abroad are subject to local jurisdiction wherever they commit their crimes and we have to respect the right of other countries to decide their own sentencing guidelines. Indeed, we expect the same respect ourselves. The harsh penalties imposed in some states for offences such as drug trafficking and sex offences are widely advertised and very few prisoners can genuinely claim to have been ignorant of them. Our travel advice notices for countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Morocco and Saudi Arabia include warnings about their sentencing policies.

We know the strong support that Sandra's case has attracted, which has been reflected this evening. Indeed, I stress that we have brought that support to the attention of the Thai authorities and I am sure that this debate will similarly be brought to their attention. Our embassy in Bangkok wrote to the Thai authorities on 25 August 1999 to draw their attention to a petition submitted by Sandra's

supporters in the UK. Our embassy wrote again on 3 November 1999 to explain our policy to them and to make it clear to the Thai authorities that our lack of formal support should not act to deter them from exercising clemency.

In any case, success or failure of clemency pleas does not rest on Government support. Unsupported clemency pleas have been successful in Thailand and a Government-supported plea on behalf of a prisoner with a terminal illness was unsuccessful.

The Thais have been considering Sandra's royal pardon petition for two and a half years. In December 1999, we were told that we would hear the decision of Sandra's royal pardon petition early in the new year—the hon. Gentleman rightly asked about that point. However, on 6 January, our embassy in Bangkok was told that it is now likely to be known in the middle of this year. While we sympathise with Sandra's family, and anyone who is separated from their loved ones, the compassionate circumstances do not exist that would warrant the Government formally supporting her plea to the Thai authorities for early release, but that does not mean that we have not made representations. I am sure that the Thai authorities will also take careful note of this debate.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the case of Patricia Hussain. The Government declined to support Ms Hussain's royal pardon petition because there were insufficient compassionate circumstances. However, we did write to the Thai Foreign Minister in late 1997 explaining that we would not support her plea, but drawing his attention to the way in which Ms Hussain had co-operated with the Customs authorities in the UK and the United States following her arrest. On 11 November 1999, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed our embassy in Bangkok that Ms Hussain's plea for clemency had been granted and her sentence reduced further to 10 years. She now qualifies to be considered for release on parole according to UK parole regulations.

The decision to grant Ms Hussain clemency rested entirely with the Thai authorities, as does the decision on Sandra's case. As I have already said, we have made similar representations on Sandra's behalf, most recently on 3 November 1999. I am sure that those responsible will take note of those recommendations, as I am sure that they will take note of the powerful arguments expressed in the House this evening by the hon. Member for Gordon.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eleven minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 18 January 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

UNITED REFORMED CHURCH BILL *[Lords]*

Read the Third time, and passed.

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (*By Order*)

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Monday 24 January at Seven o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Turkey

1. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): If he will make a statement on Turkey's EU candidature status. [R] [104187]

Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Keith Vaz): We welcome the Helsinki European Council's decision that Turkey is a candidate for EU accession. Turkey is an important partner for Britain and the EU, a NATO ally which provided vital support in the Gulf and Kosovo crises, and a major market for UK exporters. The UK has been working hard for a more constructive relationship between the EU and Turkey. We have now secured that. Turkey will enjoy all the benefits of other candidates, including financial assistance. For its part, Turkey must meet the same criteria for accession as other candidates. In particular, it will need to improve its record on human rights and protection of minorities before accession negotiations can begin.

Mr. Chapman: Does my hon. Friend agree that Turkey's candidature status represents a historical juncture for Turkey and the EU? Does he also agree that this valued ally and important geo-political country will now face both challenges and opportunities, and that it will have to deal sensitively with both internal issues and external perceptions? Will he join me in welcoming Mr. Ecevit's decision to await the views of the European Court of Human Rights before referring the case of Abdullah Ocalan to his Parliament?

Mr. Vaz: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does as chairman of the British-Turkey parliamentary group, which has been helpful in cementing relationships between our countries. He is right to say that this is a historic moment for Turkey. We were delighted that it achieved candidate status without conditions. He is also right that it is important that Turkey considers its human rights record. The decisions to refer the case of Mr. Ocalan to the European Court of Human Rights and to suspend the death penalty are welcome, and we hope that the Turkish Government will respect the court's decision.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): What positive help do the Government intend to give Turkey to help with the reforms necessary for accession negotiations to begin?

Mr. Vaz: Turkey will get all the support that it needs, as will all applicant candidates. At the moment, we give 375 million euros through the European Union's NEDA programme. We also intend to ensure that we help Turkey to prioritise the various difficulties that it will face in the future, so that it can begin its negotiations as soon as it meets the Copenhagen criteria on political and economic issues.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): The Minister will be well aware that many people are deeply concerned about the news of Turkey's candidature, given the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus, the abuse of human rights in Turkey and the situation of the Kurdish people. Will he assure the House that the British Government will spend no further money on the Ilusu dam project until a full environmental impact assessment has been made of the entire project and consideration has been given to the effects on the villagers in the area and on the Kurdish people whose land is about to be flooded for the benefit of big business—apparently supported by several western Governments?

Mr. Vaz: I know of my hon. Friend's interest in those matters. He is a passionate supporter of the Kurdish people and he will know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has made it clear that he is minded to grant export credit to Balfour Beatty, provided that various assurances—such as those my hon. Friend mentioned—are met. When those assurances are forthcoming, I am sure that my right hon. Friend will make the right decision.

EU Intergovernmental Conference

2. **Mr. Nigel Waterson** (Eastbourne): If he will make a statement on the Government's proposals for the next European Union intergovernmental conference. [104189]

11. **Mr. Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury): If he will make a statement on the plans to extend qualified majority voting at the intergovernmental conference. [104199]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): The Government argued successfully at Helsinki for an IGC focused on enlargement with a target of completion by the end of the year. I outlined the Government's objectives in detail to the House on 1 December. We place particular importance on securing a shift in the weighting of votes within the Council of Ministers to reflect more fairly the

population of the larger countries such as ourselves. The Government believe that key matters of national interest are better resolved by unanimity, but where majority voting may help to overcome obstacles to reform it could be in Britain's interest to support it.

Enlargement may nearly double the number of member states of the European Union. All Members of the House who support enlargement will want the IGC to reach agreement enabling Europe to open its doors to the new democracies of central and eastern Europe.

Mr. Waterson: I am grateful for that answer. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm precisely the areas in which he intends to sign up to qualified majority voting where it does not apply at the moment? Why cannot he embrace the Conservative vision of a more flexible and outward-looking Europe, which is in tune with the views of the great majority of the British people?

Mr. Cook: If I were to embrace the Conservative vision, I should find myself in opposition, as that vision was rejected by the British people at the last election.

As I have said often before, and am happy to repeat to the House today, there are matters that we consider to be off limits for majority voting. They include border controls, defence, taxation, social security, own resources matters, and treaty amendments. There may well be other occasions when it could be in our interests to secure majority voting—such as reform of the European Court of Justice, for example. Other member states appear before the court much more often than Britain does, so it could well be in our interests to establish procedures that will enable us to get justice faster against other member states.

Mr. Robertson: Is not the alternative to extending qualified majority voting for the European Union to engage in fewer matters and to interfere in fewer areas of our national life? Does the Secretary of State recall that the previous Labour Government promised that the British Minister would always have a veto, and that it was only on that basis that the British people ever agreed to be members of the European Union in the first place?

Mr. Cook: Actually, the rate at which directives are issued from Brussels has slackened off since the height of the single market, when the Conservative party was in office. In that period, the then Conservative Government agreed the extension of majority voting in 42 different articles of European Union affairs—the largest expansion in the use of majority voting in the EU's history.

I have no quarrel with that, as the previous Conservative Government were right to act in that way. Any rational member state would have agreed to do so. However, I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman will be persuaded by what I have said, judging by the speech that he made last year, in which he asked whether the European Union was the new Soviet Union. The answer that he appeared to give to that question was yes.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Does my right hon. Friend agree that arms sales should be a matter for qualified majority voting in the European Union? It appears that the EU's decision to lift the embargo on arms sales to Indonesia was not unanimous. Would not that be a proper subject for discussion at the next inter-governmental conference, especially as it is known that the military in Indonesia are still responsible for human rights abuses in many provinces, such as Aceh, Irian Jaya and the Spice islands? In addition, British-made equipment has been used in the Moluccas in the past two weeks. Is not the matter of arms sales a proper subject for discussion and for qualified majority voting?

Mr. Cook: I have just told the House that we would not accept majority voting in defence matters. I should be in some difficulty if I were to accept an obligation to abide by an arms embargo on the basis of a majority vote. The arms embargo on Indonesia was introduced on British recommendation and with our strong support. At the time, major atrocities were being committed in East Timor and Jakarta had not respected the outcome of the referendum in East Timor. Both problems have been remedied. East Timor is currently administered by the United Nations, and the United Nations' mandated force guarantees peace there. In addition, the new Government in Indonesia have accepted that East Timor must become an independent state.

I welcome the democratic process that has resulted in a new democratic presence in Indonesia. I welcome especially the changes that have been made to bring the army under control, and the appointment of Indonesia's first-ever civilian minister of defence. Nevertheless, we made it clear last week in Brussels that we want the lifting of the embargo to remain under continual review. In the event of a return to the sort of disturbances that occurred in East Timor, we would want the embargo to be reimposed.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South–West): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the extension of qualified majority voting could be to our advantage in connection with a number of issues to do with Gibraltar? At present, Spain is blocking the extension to Gibraltar of a number of measures that apply to the rest of the United Kingdom.

Given that Conservative Members generally like to present themselves as great defenders of Gibraltar, is my right hon. Friend surprised that, in this instance, they refuse to support a measure that would be greatly to the advantage of Gibraltarians?

Mr. Cook: I am very glad that my hon. Friend was able to get the second part of her question in. She gives a perfectly good example of how majority voting can be in our interest. The problem with the veto that has occurred on some occasions has been to do not with the issue being voted on, but with the linkage made by one member state to another issue that has nothing at all to do with the matter under consideration.

Mr. Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells): Further to the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), does the Secretary of State remember that, last December, he failed to distance himself from the Labour MEPs who voted in favour of putting flexibility on the intergovernmental conference agenda? Will the right hon. Gentleman now distance himself from Simon Murphy, the third Labour leader of the MEPs in the last year and a so-called "Blairite", who voted in favour of a resolution extending qualified

majority voting to certain aspects of taxation? Last month, Mr. Murphy voted in favour of a resolution deploring the "lack of political vision" displayed by leaders at Helsinki, of whom the Prime Minister is presumably one, and complaining that the IGC agenda was "inadequate". Alternatively, does the right hon. Gentleman agree with me that it is yet another example of Labour keeping quiet in Britain but voting in favour of deeper integration in Brussels?

Mr. Cook: I have been plain to the House, and I have been plain everywhere in Britain, on what our objectives at the IGC will be. I have stated those objectives again today, and they are not changed by any debate in the European Parliament. However, I am happy to share common cause with parties in developing a constructive engagement in Europe with Simon Hughes and the other Labour MEPs—[HON. MEMBERS: "Simon Murphy"]—him as well—on that point.

The hon. Gentleman should explain to the House why six Tory MEPs have now formed common cause with the UK Independence party, which is committed to withdrawal from the European Union. Is he content to have people in his party and standing for his party committed to a platform of withdrawal from the European Union?

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the two biggest expansions of qualified majority voting in the European Union took place under the regimes of Mrs. Thatcher and the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major)? Does he agree that it is intellectually dishonest to claim that one supports the expansion of the European Union while refusing to countenance an expansion in qualified majority voting?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend goes to the heart of the point. If we could retain the British veto while everybody else lost theirs, it might be a fair trade-off. Conservative Members are campaigning not only to keep a British veto on everything but to keep a Belgian, a Dutch and a German veto and, after enlargement, to keep a Slovak veto and a Cyprus veto as well. In those circumstances, it may be difficult to get through some decisions that are very important to Britain's national interests.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): May I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his recent interventions on Europe, particularly with regard to monetary union? Will he endorse the conclusion of the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), that in its first year of operation, the euro was a considerable success and that we should be part of the system soon?

Mr. Cook: Congratulations from any quarters are always welcome and happily received. However, I repeat that the Government's position is well known: we will decide whether to join the European single currency on the basis of the tests of economic conditions and whether joining would be in the interests of the British people. The Conservative party has said that, even if it was in Britain's economic interests, it would not join, nor would it agree, as we would, that the British people should decide for themselves. The Conservative party would deny the British people a referendum. With that sharp contrast in mind, I am happy to fight the next election on that issue.

Pakistan

3. **Mr. Geraint Davies** (Croydon, Central): If he will make a statement on progress towards restoring a democratic Government in Pakistan. [104190]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We continue to press General Musharraf for progress towards the restoration of democracy. Last week, Sir Charles Guthrie, Chief of Defence Staff, took a strong message from the Prime Minister to the military regime seeking a route-map to the restoration of democracy. We look to General Musharraf to fulfil his commitment to prepare Pakistan for a civilian, democratic Government.

Mr. Davies: Is my right hon. Friend aware that many in the Pakistani community, particularly in Croydon, are fairly happy about the military coup in Pakistan, which they regard as a necessary condition of getting rid of bad governance and bringing about stability? They also welcome the announcement by the new regime of local government elections. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming that announcement and, given Britain's wealth of experience in local government, will he give an idea of the support that we might give to enable successful, democratic and blossoming local government in Pakistan?

Mr. Cook: We have already said that we are willing to provide technical assistance to help Pakistan return to a credible and fair form of democracy. It would be welcome if General Musharraf proceeded with his commitment to local democracy, and the Government would be happy to consider any bona fide request for help. At the same time, however, and while we do not call for the restoration of the status quo in the form of the Sharif Government, we cannot condone a military coup. That would not be welcome to our many friends around the world who are determined to retain civilian democratic government.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear to the Government of Pakistan that any attempt to bring the former Prime Minister to trial will be viewed with great suspicion and dismay? When the matter is next discussed by Commonwealth heads of Government, will the right hon. Gentleman make the point to some of them—for example, Mr. Mugabe of Zimbabwe—that if they put their own houses in order, they would have much more plausibility on this matter?

Mr. Cook: We would all deplore a show trial of the former Prime Minister. Mr. Sharif and others are, of course, covered by the law, and they can therefore be fairly brought to court if they have committed a bona fide breach of the law. The circumstances around the abandonment of the first attempt at a trial of Mr. Sharif were of some concern, and we shall continue to press

Mr. Musharraf's Government fully to recognise the rights of the former Prime Minister and the others on trial with him.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): We all want a return to democracy in Pakistan as soon as possible, and the previous Government of Pakistan were not acceptable and had many failings. What steps has General Musharraf announced to ensure a return to normality? What support can we give to ensure that that objective is achieved as quickly as possible?

Mr. Cook: We very much welcome General Musharraf's repeated commitments to a return to democracy and his specific commitment to local elections. We await with keen anticipation the details of how and when those commitments will be fulfilled. General Sir Charles Guthrie went to Pakistan last week and pressed the Government to produce both a route to democracy and a date by which we might expect some of the announced measures to occur. We await the return of democracy, both on the map and the calendar, and I hope that General Musharraf will meet his own commitment in the near future.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): May I undertake to pass on the Foreign Secretary's invitation to my hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)? Do we not need real and credible evidence of measurable progress in the restoration of democratic government to Pakistan and in the recognition of human rights before there can be any question of our raising the suspension of arms sales to that country? Should not similar principles lie behind our relations with other countries, particularly East Timor? What evidence is there of the achievement of stability, democratic government and universal recognition of human rights in that country?

Mr. Cook: East Timor is entirely administered by the United Nations and a security force is present to ensure that stability is maintained. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman intended to refer to Indonesia, I am happy to respond in that spirit. There has been progress towards a democratic Government in that country, including election of the first democratically chosen president and appointment of the first human rights minister, who, because of what he has said in the past on human rights, has some credibility. The Indonesian Cabinet is also a genuine attempt at achieving a better balance of representation across Indonesia.

It is early days yet, and we shall continue closely to review the situation. In Brussels last week, we made it clear that if there were a return to the kind of episodes seen in East Timor, there would be a case for reconsidering the arms embargo. I stress that it is not the case, as has been suggested, that there are no limits on arms sales to Indonesia. As before, any sale will be judged fully against our criteria, and we approved only £2 million worth of licences for new equipment last year.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): When my right hon. Friend holds discussions with the Pakistani Government on the return to democracy in that country, will he also have a word about the human rights of women, especially in regard to last year's Amnesty International report on so-called "honour killings"?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have reflected on the honour killings in several representations that we made to Pakistan under its previous regime, and for some time. It will continue to be a major issue of concern in our dealings with that country.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Is not the sad truth that, whether Pakistan's Government have been military or democratic, it has been one of the most corrupt countries in the world? It has been linked, as a state sponsor, to terrorism in Kashmir; it is a source of the drugs trade, as well as being a route for the hard drugs trade in this country; it has co-operated with North Korea on missile and nuclear technology; and it has been prey to Islamic extremism.

Set against that, the coming or going of a military Government in Pakistan is perhaps less important than it would be elsewhere. Should not the policy of our Government be more determined by those very serious factors, which affect our interests as well as those of our partners and allies, before we deal with the nature of the Government of Pakistan? Surely, those fundamental problems of Pakistan must be sorted out first.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman raises a number of very important issues, which are indeed of concern to the Government. However, in many cases, the conduct of the Pakistan military has been much at the forefront of matters of concern. A military regime is not more likely to address those concerns than were past Governments.

As for the visit last week, I report to the hon. Gentleman and to the House that we did make a particular point of including in our message that we expect Pakistan to abide by its international obligations to fight international terrorism. We shall watch events closely in the coming months.

Drugs Trade

9. **Mr. Frank Roy** (Motherwell and Wishaw): What action his Department has taken to combat the drugs trade, with particular reference to Latin America. [104191]

10. **Mr. Paul Goggins** (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): What recent discussion he has had with the US Government with regard to the drugs trade involving Colombia. [104197]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): The Foreign Office co-ordinates the United Kingdom's international counter-drugs activities. We attach importance to the effective engagement of all Departments and agencies concerned—including the intelligence agencies—in combating the drugs trade. During the financial year 1998-99, the Foreign Office spent £5.9 million on projects in support of the UK drugs strategy. On 5 January, we announced a contribution of £2.286 million towards projects under the

United Nations international drug control programme concerning Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, Afghanistan, Bulgaria, Romania and Macedonia.

Mr. Roy: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that banks should do everything in their power to reveal where the criminal elements—the drugs barons of Latin America and, indeed, throughout the world—stow their criminal money? Will he support moves to ensure that off-shore tax havens are far more transparent?

Mr. Vaz: I agree with my hon. Friend. I assure him that the UK, in all dealings and discussions with our colleagues abroad, ensures that the issue is raised. We believe that there should be transparency and international co-operation, and that those who profit from illegal trafficking of drugs ought to be exposed. That is why we are leading members of the global programme on trafficking and of the financial action task force on money laundering. We believe that that is the only way to combat the hiding of the proceeds of crime.

Mr. Goggins: Last Tuesday, President Clinton announced a $1.3 billion aid programme for Colombia—most of it military aid. Although effective action on drugs is essential, does my hon. Friend agree that military aid alone is not enough? Will he encourage the United States to work with the Colombian Government to strengthen human rights in Colombia, and to secure the peace that alone can defeat the drugs barons whose filthy money currently funds the civil war in that country?

Mr. Vaz: I know of my hon. Friend's interest in these matters and that he visited Colombia last year. He is absolutely right. We should give as much support as possible to the Government of President Pastrana. We are giving support: we are giving advice and assistance on conflict prevention and helping the Colombians to deal with those who traffic in drugs. We shall continue that support on our own, and also bilaterally with other countries that share our view.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): On reflection, does the Minister agree that it was a mistake to cut the role of the Royal Navy's West Indies guardship in the Caribbean, especially remembering that only last November the crew of HMS Northumberland was responsible for recovering cocaine with a street value of £135 million? Would not restoring the guardship for the full 12 months of the year be a cost-effective way of playing our part in tackling drug trafficking?

Mr. Vaz: There are many ways in which we play a part in ensuring that drug trafficking is kept under control—for example, in preventing the inflow of drugs to this country. Last year, Customs and Excise seized 2,800 kg of cocaine. This is not just a matter for the Foreign Office. We need to work with all the agencies involved in this country and abroad to ensure that the practice is dealt with as effectively as possible.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I appreciate the work that is being done to try to combat the pernicious traffic in drugs. What success has been achieved in the banking world or with other Governments in curbing numbered bank accounts, which create one of the great difficulties in tracking drug traffickers?

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That problem goes to the root of what we need to do on the various bodies, such as the global programme on money laundering, on which we sit. We need to ensure that there is transparency and accountability. The only way that we can achieve that is to work with financial institutions and other countries to ensure that that happens.

HIV-AIDS

5. **Mr. Russell Brown** (Dumfries): If he will raise the issue of HIV-AIDS in the developing world at the next G8 summit in Japan. [104192]

9. **Mr. Neil Gerrard** (Walthamstow): What plans he has to ensure that the G8 summit in Japan will discus the impact that HIV-AIDS is having on the developing world. [104196]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): Health and, in particular, HIV-AIDS is one of the issues on which we place priority for this year's G8 summit at Okinawa. We are working with the Japanese presidency and G8 partners to get it high on the agenda.

Mr. Brown: I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that, across the African continent, there is a wide variation in the way in which different Governments tackle the issue of HIV and AIDS. For example, in Uganda, some excellent work is going on. However, in other countries, there is serious concern that the money that should have gone into HIV and AIDS programmes is being diverted into other areas. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the good practice that is being seen in certain countries is promoted in others, especially in countries where we suspect that Governments are not taking the issue as seriously as we would hope?

Mr. Hain: Yes, I shall certainly do that. My hon. Friend raises an excellent point. In Uganda, I visited at Entebbe a health centre financed in part by the British Government that is helping to drive forward an excellent programme. Its importance compared with other countries in Africa is that the Ugandan President has put himself at the head of the campaign. As a result of imaginative measures, such as pop songs, condom distribution, billboards and other initiatives, the rate of infection in Uganda is at last slowing. That is certainly not the case elsewhere in Africa.

Mr. Gerrard: May I welcome the lead that the Government have given, the money that has been committed over the next three years and, especially, the £14 million that has been given to the international AIDS vaccine initiative? Will my hon. Friend encourage other G8 countries to take similar action, so that we have a common approach that recognises the devastating economic impact of HIV as well as the health aspects? Will he also raise at the summit the question of how we ensure that, in the future, people in developing countries have access to new treatments and that we do not have a

repetition of the problems that were faced in South Africa last year, when pharmaceutical companies tried to stop the compulsory licensing of drugs by the South African Government?

Mr. Hain: Again, my hon. Friend makes excellent points with which I agree. I stress his point about the economic impact of AIDS. In Zimbabwe, for example, one in four adults is infected. That is hitting not just ordinary people, but those right at the top of the country and it will have a devastating effect on the country's future professional life and economic expertise.

That is why the Prime Minister's initiative at the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference last November, to which my hon. Friend referred indirectly, and Vice-President Gore's initiative last week when he called for war on AIDS at the United Nations security conference, are so much to be welcomed.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, while the important matter of HIV-AIDS will be dealt with at the G8 conference as a discrete matter, the G8 should take care also to recognise the many other serious diseases by which poorer countries in particular are afflicted? Does he agree that the G8, which must on occasion be one of the smuggest gatherings that the world could ever see, has a duty to recognise that prosperity and health are the only ways in which some poorer countries will struggle out of the serious position in which they find themselves?

Mr. Hain: The hon. Gentleman makes such a convincing case that he should perhaps cross the Floor, as some of his colleagues have done. I agree that epidemics, such as malaria in some parts of Africa, are a bigger challenge than AIDS and should be high on the G8 agenda, and that the G8 should take its responsibilities seriously, not least because, ultimately, widespread epidemics in the developing world threaten our security, environmental and health interests in the west.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does the Minister agree that conflict and civil war are great factors in the spread of HIV and AIDS, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa? When will he do something about the activities of arms brokers which fuel those wars and continue the agony in Africa?

Mr. Hain: Again, the hon. Lady makes a point that I agree with. We have taken a series of initiatives—for example, we have pressed the Ukrainian Government to tackle their arms dealers to ensure that they stop supplying areas of conflict in Africa, including Angola in the form of supplies to UNITA. We need to keep pressing that case, and our policy is in complete contrast to that of the Conservative Government, who seemed to want to encourage the sale of arms to just about everybody in sight.

Kashmir

6. **Kali Mountford** (Colne Valley): What recent representations he has received concerning Indian policy towards Kashmir. [104193]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): We have received many letters and representations, and we take every opportunity to urge a just and lasting solution to Kashmir. Only last week, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met his Indian counterpart and, during my visit to India in November, I also raised the matter at the highest level. We shall continue to press both India and Pakistan.

Kali Mountford: Is it not correct that people in Kashmir are suffering greatly because of cross-border terrorism and that the tension is increased by the presence of troops? Is it not now time, notwithstanding the problems with the Pakistani Government, to reiterate the Foreign Secretary's call on the Pakistani and Indian Governments to return to dialogue before the conflict worsens?

Mr. Hain: Yes, it is. We want the Lahore process to be resumed as soon as possible, and it would be in the interests of the leadership in both Delhi and Islamabad to do so. I agree strongly with my hon. Friend that Pakistani cross-border terrorism is proving to be an enormous threat to the stability of Kashmir. We look to General Musharraf, as the Chief of the Defence Staff told him on his visit last week, to make sure that, under his regime, such terrorism stops. We particularly look to General Musharraf, who is widely seen as the author of the Kargil incident last year, to ensure that nothing like that ever happens again.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): Is there any sign, perhaps in the Minister's talks in India or the Foreign Secretary's visits, that the parties concerned are prepared to meet under the provisions of the Simla agreement to discuss the future of Kashmir? If they were to do so, would the United Kingdom be prepared to chair such a conference, bearing in mind that it was our premature withdrawal from India—six months early—which denied the people of Kashmir the plebiscite on their future, and has led to the difficulties, which have existed now for over half a century?

Mr. Hain: We have made it clear that we stand ready to help in the resolution of the Kashmiri conflict, provided that India and Pakistan jointly ask us to do so. Our role would depend on their invitation. In any case, it is essential, notwithstanding the recent tensions between the two countries, that they start talking because, over Kargil in particular, there was a danger of a massive conflict erupting. Given that both countries are nuclear powers, that could have been extremely dangerous.

Africa (Conflict Resolution)

7. **Ms Joan Ryan** (Enfield, North): What recent discussions he has had with the United States over conflict resolution in Africa. [104194]

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): In Washington and New York last month, I had discussions with members of the United States Administration, including the Assistant Secretary

for Africa, Susan Rice, and the American ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke. Topics included Angola, Sierra Leone and the Great Lakes.

Ms Ryan: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Having had such meetings, he must be aware that private companies, private individuals and other countries are breaking United Nations sanctions by supplying fuel and other goods to Angola, as we have heard already, thus helping to perpetuate a war that is causing much devastation and misery. That is unacceptable. Will my hon. Friend tell the House what the Government will be doing about this situation?

Mr. Hain: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is vital that private individuals and companies engaged in breaking the law by deliberately breaching UN sanctions on UNITA are stopped. I can inform the House that we are referring to the UN sanctions committee today, and its expert panels, the details of three such individuals, which we hope they will be able to follow up.

It is widely known in the region that Jacques "Kiki" Lemaire flies in diesel fuel, landing on UNITA airstrips in a Boeing 707 or Caravelle aircraft. Tony Teixeira has been supplying diesel fuel to UNITA, again flying it in by plane. Victor Bout, who runs an air transport company, has flown in arms to UNITA. It is also believed that Bout owns or charters an Ilyushin 76 aircraft, which was impounded in Zambia en route to Angola last year.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Why did the Minister not include Sudan on the list of those countries which he discussed with his United States counterparts last week? What steps do the Government propose to take in trying to resolve the appalling conditions in southern Sudan and to resolve the civil war there? The population is literally starving to death and HIV-AIDS is rampant. Surely this must be the year that the Government determine to take an initiative, and to make a real effort, to try to solve the problem.

Mr. Hain: I did indeed discuss Sudan, along with many other African countries, with the United States Administration. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is vital that the civil conflict or war is resolved early. We are supporting the EGAD process, and we are in discussions with the Egyptians on their initiative, to ensure that we make every effort to end an unremitting conflict that has so devastated Sudan.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (Telford): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is always a risk that a long-standing, long-running tragedy, such as the war in Angola, can often be forgotten or overlooked when flashpoints occur elsewhere? The origins of the war in Angola were closely related to the evils of apartheid in South Africa, which have now thankfully been brought to an end. With my hon. Friend's special knowledge of South Africa, will he ensure that, in his conversations with his counterparts in the United States and elsewhere, he will not allow the conflict in Angola, which has continued for more than a generation, to slip in any way on the international agenda? We owe it to all to bring the suffering in that country to an end.

Mr. Hain: I shall certainly be discussing the matter with the South African Government when I visit that country at the end of the month. I give high priority, as surely the whole House should, to ensuring that the dreadful conflict, which has killed hundreds of thousands of people and which has been fomented by Jonas Savimbi's UNITA, is ended quickly. Countries in Europe and the United States and countries in Africa, especially those neighbouring Angola, can bring the conflict to an end if there is the will to do so. With fuel and arms being flown in, sanctions are being breached almost daily. If UN sanctions are to mean anything, they must bite. Britain is determined that they should do so.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): The Minister, with his great knowledge of Africa, will know that increasingly sinister alliances are being attracted. For example, the Congo is buying Scud missiles from Iran and President Kabila is having his troops trained by the North Koreans. In the United Kingdom, the smuggling of missile components to Libya that would extend the range of their missiles has been discovered.

In the light of the escalating threat from Africa, what discussions has the Minister had with the Americans about the positioning of a missile defence shield in Europe? As the United States carries out its anti-ballistic missile tests over the Pacific today, does he agree that we should be increasing our support and co-operation with the United States, in the interests of our own security?

Mr. Hain: I admire the hon. Lady's ingenuity in extending the question. We are in regular dialogue with our colleagues in Washington and elsewhere in the US about our commitment, as a Labour Government, to nuclear disarmament and to making sure that we rid the world of the threat to global security posed by weapons of mass destruction. We will continue to pursue that dialogue to ensure that our objectives are achieved.

Cuba

8. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): What recent discussions he has had with the Cuban Government. [104195]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I met my Cuban counterpart, Felipe Perez Roque, in the margins of the Rio summit in June, the first such formal meeting since the 1950s. At that meeting and at others, we have raised our concern over human rights in Cuba. However, it remains our strong view that we are more likely to make progress on human rights and other issues of mutual concern through dialogue than through blockade.

Dr. Gibson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have much to learn from Cuba—high literacy rates, a health service that apparently works the whole year round, and a successful bio-technology industry? When he is next in the State Department in Washington, will he urge

the Americans to remove their blockade of the Cuban people and lift the economic and travel sanctions against them?

Mr. Cook: There are opportunities for us to co-operate to our mutual benefit. One such example is the agreement to develop the vaccine against meningitis between SmithKline Beecham and the Finlay institute in Cuba. I welcome such co-operation to the mutual benefit of our two countries and our two peoples.

May I say to my hon. Friend that Cuba also has a lot to learn from the rest of the world? I endorse the view that we are likely to make progress if Cuba becomes more open to the world, and the world becomes more open to Cuba.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Does the Secretary of State agree with Human Rights Watch in its report last year, which observed that Cuba has developed a highly efficient machinery of repression? Under the terms of our ethical foreign policy, why are we engaging with Cuba in a way in which we are not prepared to engage, for example, with Burma?

Mr. Cook: I have always made it clear that we are more likely to make progress if we are prepared to deal with regimes about which we have concern, where there is a possibility of engaging in genuine and sincere dialogue. I have great difficulty in sitting down with members of the military regime in charge of Burma, not only because of its extensive ethnic cleansing of large parts of Burma, and not only because of the fact that at one time it had 200 elected Members of Parliament locked up, but because of its plain connivance and complicity in the heroin trade from Burma, to which it is a major contributor.

In the case of Cuba, I did raise with the Foreign Minister of Cuba a number of the issues of concern to Human Rights Watch and the rest of us, in particular the trial of four people for doing nothing other than calling for national elections.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): In my right hon. Friend's communication with the Cuban Government, has he made it clear that Her Majesty's Government support the principle that the little boy who is now in Florida should be returned to his natural father, and that we are making representations to the United States in support of that view?

Mr. Cook: That is entirely a matter for the immigration authorities of the United States and its bilateral relations with Cuba. With respect to my hon. Friend, I will not run my neck into that noose.

Yugoslavia

12. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the sanctions currently applied to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [104200]

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Keith Vaz): The EU sanctions regime is a crucial part of the EU's strategy to encourage democratic reform in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The United Kingdom continues to oppose any easing of the regime while the current Government are in power in Belgrade, and we fully support the humanitarian exemptions to the regime and the exemptions for Kosovo and Montenegro.

Mr. Heath: Does the Minister recognise that many of us who wholeheartedly supported the intervention in Kosovo nevertheless have grave reservations about the present sanctions regime against Yugoslavia? Is it not possible to make the sanctions regime more effective and less counterproductive or, better still, to find alternative ways of encouraging the Government of Yugoslavia towards better government? Lastly, will the Minister make sure that there is no hindrance or bar to humanitarian aid for a population that has already suffered enough from Milosevic and his antics?

Mr. Vaz: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the constructive way in which he asked his question. We have no quarrel with the people of Serbia, only with Milosevic. The sanctions regime is important to ensure that his regime understands that his behaviour is cruel. Of course we are providing humanitarian aid—the European Union contributed 62 million euros last year through its humanitarian office in Belgrade. We shall continue to provide that aid, but we shall not allow Milosevic to get away with his behaviour. Sanctions will continue, and will be monitored at every opportunity.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Are not sanctions idiotic and counterproductive? Do not they strengthen Milosevic as they strengthened Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Vaz: No. I supported sanctions against South Africa, and I fully support sanctions against Serbia.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): One part of the Yugoslav Republic suffers from a particular form of sanctions. In June, the Foreign Secretary stated:

"we are determined . . . to create a multi-ethnic Kosovo . . . we will not tolerate . . . ethnic cleansing".—[*Official Report*, 17 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 585.]

Does the Minister realise that the murder of Serbs, Bosniaks and gypsies is a daily occurrence, that more than 120,000 Serbs have been driven out of Kosovo and that the gypsy population has left en masse? Is that the multi-ethnic Kosovo that the Foreign Secretary had in mind and for which NATO fought a war?

Mr. Vaz: United Nations forces in Kosovo are ensuring that no ethnic cleansing occurs. If it does, they will ensure that those responsible are brought to justice. That is the way to tackle the problem.

Mr. Maples: I know that the subject is not as familiar to the Minister as it is to the Foreign Secretary, but that is one of the most complacent answers that has been given the House. Nearly the whole Serb population has been driven out of Kosovo. Is not the problem sheer incompetence? Of the 6,000 police requested by the United Nations mission in Kosovo, only 1,800 are in place. The Serb enclave in Mitrovica is in danger of

leading to the partition of Kosovo. Only 50,000 of the 120,000 ruined houses have been made habitable for the winter. No progress has been made in establishing a civil society. The stability pact has led to nothing and promised money has not been forthcoming. Our armed forces may have won the war, but the Foreign Secretary is losing the peace.

Mr. Vaz: The Foreign Secretary deserves enormous credit for his actions on the issue that we are considering. The hon. Gentleman should be ashamed of himself. Half of KFOR's time in Kosovo is spent protecting 5 per cent. of the population. The hon. Gentleman should support efforts in Kosovo, and not try to undermine them.

Argentina

13. **Laura Moffatt** (Crawley): If he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's relations with the Government of Argentina. [104201]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We have good relations with Argentina. Former President Menem's visit to Britain assisted the process of reconciliation and paved the way for last July's agreement, which resolved communications with the Falkland Islands and co-operation on fishing in the south Atlantic. I have invited the new Government's Foreign Minister to visit Britain, and I hope to meet him next week in the margins of an international conference.

Laura Moffatt: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement about better relations with Argentina and I share his views. However, on a visit last month to the Falkland Islanders, I became acutely aware of the sensitivities that surround those British people. Will the Foreign Secretary assure them and me that no decisions on the future of the Falkland Islands will be taken without full consultation with them or without their full approval?

Mr. Cook: I am happy to assure the House that the Falkland Islands are a British overseas territory and will remain so as long as the Falkland Islanders wish to remain British. We will not undertake any agreement in relation to Argentina without the full involvement of the Falkland Islanders. The decision that was made last July followed a long period of talks in which Falkland Island councillors took a full part and witnessed the agreement. I congratulate them on their courage and vision in looking forward to the future of the Falkland Islands.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): The master of a yacht registered in the Falklands recently received a letter from the port authorities in Ushuaia stating that boats registered in the Falklands are banned from Argentine ports. Has the Foreign Secretary taken that case up with the Argentine Government?

Mr. Cook: We have taken up the case of the Golden Fleece and understand that we are nearing a point at which the matter can be resolved in a way that will not result in a recurrence of that incident.

UN Peacekeeping Missions

14. **Mr. Michael Portillo** (Kensington and Chelsea): If he will make a statement on the future of the UK's contribution to United Nations peacekeeping missions. [104203]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We are strongly committed to UN peacekeeping and Britain will continue to play a leading role in its support. Along with France, we were the first permanent members of the Security Council to sign a memorandum of understanding on the forces that we could make available to the UN if required. More than 500 UK personnel are on UN-led peacekeeping missions, in addition to the 7,000 personnel on UN-mandated missions in Bosnia and Kosovo. The whole House can take pride in the contribution that those service men and women are making to peace and stability in the countries where they serve.

Mr. Portillo: Leaving aside practical and political considerations and focusing entirely on ethics, is there a reason to intervene in Kosovo but not in Chechnya?

Mr. Cook: We intervened in Kosovo to halt and reverse a major ethnic cleansing, and the 850,000 people who were refugees last Easter are back in their homes. In the case of Chechnya, we have repeatedly made it clear to Russia that we deplore the military action that it is taking against civilians and I honestly do not understand why the right hon. Gentleman finds anything amusing in what is happening there. We have supported the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe missions to try to find a political way forward and have already intervened by making sure that we withhold the financial support available from the European Union. I shall continue to take every possible responsible and realistic step to bring home that message to Russia. If he wants us to engage Russia in a military war, he should be honest in saying so. He would find little support, either in the House or in the country outside.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Did the Foreign Secretary have the opportunity—if not, will he take one—to see the television programme broadcast on Sunday night by Jonathan Dimbleby in which it was revealed that there is widespread intimidation of Serbs in Kosovo and ethnic cleansing on a massive scale and that the KLA, whose members were described by my right hon. Friend and the American Secretary of State as "terrorists" a year ago, is in a dominant position in Kosovo? Is he altogether satisfied that the same criteria of humanitarian assistance might not be applied to relieve the pressure there and on the Yugoslav people, who have suffered so much from the NATO bombing?

Mr. Cook: We are very willing to provide humanitarian assistance to Serbia wherever we can find an interlocutor with whom we can work. That is why we have created the energy for democracy scheme to provide fuel to municipalities under opposition control, but President Milosevic held up those trucks for a long time when they reached the borders of Serbia. In the case of Kosovo, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Europe has said, KFOR spends 50 per cent. of its time protecting the

Serbian 5 per cent. of the population. It will continue to provide their protection and we shall continue to do everything that we can to build that multi-ethnic Kosovo. I say to my right hon. Friend that I do not accept that the KLA is in a dominant position. We shall continue to work, both in NATO and with UNMIK, to make sure that hardliners and the KLA are clear that we want a Kosovo ruled by the ballot box, not the gun.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): It is all very well to say that KFOR is spending 50 per cent. of its time defending the Serbian minority in Kosovo but, although the UN has been criticised in respect of its role, we are not helping those people. The Serb community in Pristina is down to negligible proportions, Serb monasteries are being desecrated as soon as troops leave them and the only safe Serbs are those who are protected by their own people and herded into safe havens. The policy is not working, the whole basis of the war has gone wrong, one exodus has been replaced by another and the reply from the Minister for Europe was wholly complacent. We have to do something to protect those people.

Mr. Cook: If I may say so, devoting half KFOR's time to protecting those people is doing something. Some sense of proportion must be retained. I know that the hon. Gentleman was not keen on our intervention in Kosovo but, as a result of it, we have seen the most successful return of refugees—850,000—in post-war history. If we had not intervened, those people would still be leading a miserable existence in tents in Macedonia and Albania.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have given private notice of this point of order both to you and to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Rev. Ian Paisley), to whom it refers.

Yesterday, I received a letter from someone in Northern Ireland, who had received it from the hon. Member for North Antrim. It described the new education Minister as "a terrorist".

Whatever the merits of strong feeling in the House, we try to contain our feelings within the normal courtesies of language. Although those words were not used in the House—had they been, Madam Speaker, I am sure that you would have rebuked the hon. Member who used them—they were conveyed in a House of Commons envelope, paid for by the state, and related to a Member who is also an education Minister.

I do not want to make too much of this, Madam Speaker, but I wonder whether you feel able to say anything at this point about the use of language. Terrorism is a criminal offence, and to use such language at a time when the peace process is developing in Northern Ireland might merit the Chair's consideration.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Is it related to the earlier point of order?

Dr. Lewis: Yes, Madam Speaker. Can you tell us whether you have received any notification from the Serjeant at Arms or the security advisers of the House that, if two members of Sinn Fein are to be offered facilities in the House, there will be arrangements in future for Members' cars not just to be checked for bombs on the way into the car park, but to be checked for such devices on the way out of it?

Madam Speaker: I never discuss security arrangements across the Floor of the House.

Let me respond to what was said by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), who, with his customary courtesy, gave me notice of his point of order. I am afraid that the circumstances that he describes—those involving private correspondence between a Member and his or her constituents—do not call for a ruling from the Chair. I cannot intervene in correspondence between a Member and a constituent.

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I have written to you about it, and have sent a copy to the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster).

During Prime Minister's questions last Wednesday, the hon. Gentleman began by praising the staff of the Conquest hospital. That is not in dispute, but the hon. Gentleman then told the House:

"no one in need has been turned away".—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 275.]

On Friday, I checked with the chief executive of the Hastings and Rother NHS trust, who told me that all elective surgery at the Conquest had been stopped for 10 days by then. More than 100 of the hon. Gentleman's constituents, and my constituents, with appointments in January for surgery that they need have been turned away. As of yesterday, elective surgery was still suspended, so yet more people are being turned away.

Are you able to advise hand-wringing Government Back Benchers that if they wish to be bullied by their Whips and Alastair Campbell that is a matter for them, but if they are to peddle downright untruths at Prime Minister's Question Time to make the Prime Minister look more effective—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for sending me a long letter about this matter, but I must again make a point that I made earlier in the week. What the hon. Gentleman has said is not a point of order, but a matter of argument. If he feels that the matter needs to be corrected, there are ways and means of doing precisely that in the House, and putting it on record.

Back Benchers in the House of Commons have greater opportunities than members of any other democratic Parliament. They have opportunities to raise matters in Adjournment debates, and through all sorts of other methods. I advise hon. Members that if they have an argument with each other because of the catchment area involved, that is not a matter for a point of order, or for the Chair; it is a matter to be corrected by means of a normal Adjournment debate, an early-day motion or some other method. The Chair should not be involved in squabbles—and that is what this is—between Members on either side of the House.

Immigration (Port of Entry) (Amendment)

3.35 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend entry requirements at air and sea ports to provide three channels of entry, one for European Union citizens, one for subjects of Her Majesty and Her successors and one for others; and for connected purposes.

I seek to introduce the measure to draw attention to an old injustice. I am grateful for the support that I have received on it from hon. Members on both sides. The countries of the inner Commonwealth, those who recognise Queen Elizabeth as their head of state, are, on the whole, those with the closest ties of kinship with this country. A high proportion of the population of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and many Caribbean countries have close relatives in this country.

The present immigration arrangements at our airports baldly reflect the law. What used to be the old British channel has been replaced by the British and EU channel, while everyone else is funnelled through the second—the "others"—channel. That reflects the legal reality of the EU, but there is more to life than legal and economic relationships.

In that frightening moment in 1940 after France had fallen, when Winston Churchill said that civilisation itself lay in the balance, this country did not stand alone. Those countries stood with us. We owe them a colossal debt. For example, a higher proportion of Australians and New Zealanders died in the two world wars than British citizens. Montgomery said that the fighting spirit of the Australian 9th division was an example to the whole 8th army.

Today, many men and women who were comrades of those who died are still alive. As one Canadian journalist put it to me, his father-in-law fought all the way through the second world war as a pilot, yet he will have to go through the "others" channel if he visits this country, while the Luftwaffe pilot, bless his heart—I mean him no ill—would come through the home channel for British and EU citizens. The Commonwealth division also fought with great distinction in Korea.

That may seem like ancient history, but it occurred within the lifetimes of some hon. Members who are currently in the House. Much more recently, Australia and Canada were among the first countries to declare their support in both the 1990 Gulf war and the 1998 Gulf crisis. In the Falklands war, New Zealand lent us one of its warships. Whatever one may think of the Kosovo operation, New Zealand was the only country outside NATO to provide troops in support, while Canada provided the fourth largest number of pilots flying missions.

Every time the ties of blood, language, loyalty and affection are raised in the House, people talk about changes in economic relationships. There has indeed been quite a big change in economic relationships: for example, those with New Zealand have changed since the butter agreement was phased out, which had an adverse affect on its economy. The same point could be made about many Caribbean countries as regards the Commonwealth sugar agreement; but Canada and Australia own a much bigger part of this country's industry than do most of our EU partners. We are the second biggest investor in both those countries. Surely, however, there is far more to life than economics. When the chips are down, again and again, we have found that shared ties of blood, values and heritage count for more.

We enjoy the same legal system. Indeed, many Caribbean countries are still plugged into our legal system. We all speak the same language, except the important French-speaking community in Quebec; but what is arguably one of its most important symbols, the Vingt Douze regiment, selected the Queen as its honorary colonel-in-chief.

I remember, some years ago, making my way through a huge crowd of holidaymakers in Cairns—it is now a favourite holiday spot for surfers—and seeing, in a prominent place, a war memorial that, if I remember rightly, started with the words,

"From this distant outpost the following gave their lives . . . ".

I asked myself what made those men and women from Cairns—people such as my great-uncle, who came over from Perth, or like a cousin from Canada, who was in a Scottish-Canadian regiment—come such a long way to share in a cause that they could so easily have shirked. I realised that the ties of kinship and values do matter.

I am not proposing a great legal change to the rights of entry, but only suggesting that, as a gesture of welcome, we should establish a third channel in our principal airports, so that residents of countries that recognise the Queen as head of state have a fast channel of their own. Given the sacrifices of so many Indian soldiers in two world wars—my grandfather served in the Indian army in the first world war—I should love to extend provision of such a channel to the Commonwealth generally, but doing so would create very considerable problems both with asylum legislation and with the difficult position of certain countries vis-à-vis the Commonwealth, including Pakistan. For the moment, therefore, I am arguing only for countries that recognise our Queen as head of state.

All those generations ago, Benjamin Disraeli said that symbols play such a big role in the imagination of our people, and that the monarchy was the most important of those symbols. As they come to our airports and seaports, let us give a warm welcome to citizens of countries that share that pre-eminent symbol, with all that it represents, by giving them an entry channel of their own.

I am grateful for the support that I have received from both sides of the House in promoting the Bill. I now ask the House to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Julian Brazier, Mr. Charles Wardle, Mr. Ken Maginnis, Mr. Joe Ashton, Sir Teddy Taylor, Mr. Gerald Bermingham, Mrs. Ann Winterton, Mr. Crispin Blunt, Mr. Owen Paterson and Mr. Andrew Robathan.

IMMIGRATION (PORT OF ENTRY) (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Julian Brazier accordingly presented a Bill to amend entry requirements at air and sea ports to provide three channels of entry, one for European Union citizens, one for subjects of Her Majesty and Her successors and one for others; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February, and to be printed [Bill 47].

Opposition Day

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

Health Care

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.43 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I beg to move,

That this House applauds the dedication and commitment of National Health Service staff whose tireless efforts alone have kept the Service going throughout the present crisis; deplores the Government's inadequate preparation for predicted winter pressures and Ministers' complacency and continual unwillingness to accept responsibility for their failures, including withholding information and misuse of statistics; notes the catalogue of mismanagement of the National Health Service by the Government, including the distortion of clinical priorities, reduced patient access to specialist care and its flawed cancer initiative; regrets the Prime Minister's assertion that there is no alternative to the Government's existing strategy; and calls on the Government to abandon ideology, put the well-being of patients before political dogma and create a health care system fit for the 21st century with a strengthened National Health Service at its centre.

On Saturday, at my constituency surgery, Mrs. Jones, from Portishead, came to see me. She told me that, since last July, although suffering from a serious illness, she has had a liver biopsy cancelled four times. That is serious enough; however, all the time Mrs. Jones has been waiting for her treatment, minor procedures have been performed in the same hospital. It is a classic example of priorities being distorted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) has been campaigning for a woman who has already waited 13 months, and may have to wait up to 17 months, for a triple heart bypass operation at Southampton General hospital. When she saw her general practitioner in December, 1998, she was informed that the wait would be about nine months. Last November, the wait was extended to between one year and 15 months. Now the woman has been told that, because of the winter crisis, the wait might be extended again.

In Staffordshire, Duncan Sheppard, a financial adviser, has had to remortgage his home for £12,000, to pay for a quadruple heart bypass. Mr. Sheppard had the operation at the private Priory hospital, in Birmingham, after being told that he would have to wait 14 months for the operation at the NHS Good Hope hospital. His wife said:

"We are just so lucky, because we were later told he only had weeks to live. We are very pleased we took this option."

That is—the option of remortgaging his home to pay for health care.

Perhaps the most worrying case was brought to my attention yesterday from North East Anglia health authority area. A man writes:

"My wife was left on a trolley for eight hours in dire need of urgent treatment for her asthma. She was left passed out for 20 minutes before a nurse came. The consultant said she needed a bed, but there were none available. She was sent home, where she collapsed. I called an ambulance. It took half an hour to arrive. She is now lying in ITU. The consultant says she may be brain damaged. I have two children and they may not now have a mother. This is disgraceful. It cannot be allowed to continue. Mr. Blair needs to do something."

Those are not typical cases of what happens in our health care system, but neither, sadly, are they isolated examples. All hon. Members are getting an increasing post bag of sad cases in which our health care provision is failing our constituents. Just before the election the Prime Minister told voters that they had 24 hours to save the NHS, but three years into his term in government, people are asking what has gone wrong. The people to whom he made promises feel angry, frightened and, above all, betrayed. How right Lord Winston was when he said:

"We have made health care unsatisfactory for a lot of people".

What an understatement that was.

What has been the response of the Secretary of State and his Ministers? In the midst of the current flu epidemic, then flu outbreak, then bronchitis outbreak, we discovered that the health care system of the world's fifth biggest economy can be brought to its knees by something cyclical, predictable and common. The Secretary of State's view is that the NHS is coping very well. The cases that I have mentioned and the hundreds of others that any Member of Parliament could cite show that it is not. The Government are guilty of complacency.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney) *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I shall give way in a moment. The NHS is only running at all thanks to the herculean efforts of its staff, to whom we all give the greatest credit. The Government's management tools for running the health service, when they are not just being complacent, are bullying and the withholding of information. I shall give examples. I caution the hon. Gentleman to remember that before he makes his intervention.

Mr. Blizzard: The hon. Gentleman is not prepared to believe the Prime Minister when he says that hospitals are managing the crisis. I wonder whether he will accept information from my local hospital. I telephoned the James Paget Healthcare NHS trust this morning and was told that the hospital was managing very well. The management are also pleased that they have just started work on a £700,000 refurbishment of the accident and emergency department and are looking forward to the £80,000 that they are going to get to treat cancer patients.

The hon. Gentleman uses anecdotes. My local hospital is managing very well. It started routine operations again last week, despite taking people from other areas in its intensive care units.

Dr. Fox: The hon. Gentleman says that his local hospital has restarted routine operations. We must ask why they had been stopped if the system was coping so well. The hon. Gentleman should be very grateful if his local hospital is coping well, because that is not the experience of many Members of Parliament.

The Government employ various means of running the national health service, including bullying. The experience of Lord Winston last week was interesting. Let us look at what he said and how he was treated by the Government. He said:

"The NHS is just deteriorating because we blame everything on the previous Government."

[Dr. Fox]

We know that. Not a single Minister will take responsibility for their own failures. Lord Winston said of the appalling treatment of his 83-year-old mother:

"It is normal. The terrifying thing is that we accept it."

We do not accept it. That is why we are having this debate. He also said:

"There is a lot wrong with the health service and no one is prepared to say so. I shouldn't really be saying these things to you now."

What sort of attitude is that? In a free Parliament, no member of either House should have to worry about what they are saying for fear of bullying.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): The hon. Gentleman has quoted a number of Labour Members. Let me quote his speech to the Tory party conference, where he said:

"I think what we are proposing will revolutionise private insurance in the way we revolutionised pensions in the 1980s."

Following the statements at the weekend on the current issues before the health service, will the hon. Gentleman now come clean? The Tories state that they want an alternative, non-ideological strategy. What will that strategy be—private health insurance?

Dr. Fox: I would urge the Labour Whips to try to give the interventions to their Back Benchers in a form that they can at least read. I will come to the explanation that the hon. Gentleman seeks later. It will be available in a monosyllabic form for Labour Back Benchers later on.

Lord Winston was so cowed after his comments because he could see what was coming. In the twilight world of new Labour spin, the dark shadow of Alastair Campbell was fast approaching. It seems that the Prime Minister's press secretary is better able to gain retractions and recantings from heretics than the inquisition ever was. The result of the grand inquisitor's intervention on this occasion was, incredibly, that Lord Winston—having made an impassioned plea for improvements in the NHS and having pointed out the deficiencies that exist—suddenly told us that he meant no criticism of the Government in any way at all. Remarkable—but it was sad to see a man of such integrity treated so shabbily by the Government's ruthless propaganda machine.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Over the weekend, the Prime Minister essentially promised billions extra for the health service, through guaranteeing real increases in expenditure towards the EU average. Could the hon. Gentleman match that pledge, given that he acknowledges that there is a need for more money? Or does he acknowledge that his tax guarantee will mean the inevitable privatisation of the health service?

Dr. Fox: We are now told that it was a pledge from the Prime Minister to raise spending to the EU average within five years. I look forward to the Secretary of State confirming that that was a pledge. I look forward to hearing which programmes from the public spending review will be sacrificed to make up the vague billions that the Prime Minister promised. That will be an interesting passage of the Secretary of State's speech.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I have given way several times. I shall do so again, but not for the moment.

We must look at the way the Government run the health service. The culture of this Government is that if information is inconvenient, deny it, corrupt it or change it—even better, withhold it. We know that the bed availability and occupancy report, which is normally published in October, has been sitting on the Secretary of State's desk. Why, we wonder? Is it because it may be slightly more critical than the Government's own report card, issued in the summer? Perhaps it is unlikely to boost the standing of the most unpopular member of the Cabinet, although I notice—to be fair—that the Secretary of State is also the least known member of the Cabinet. Goodness knows what will happen when he is better known.

Is the report being withheld because beds are being lost all the time under a Government who pretend that the trend is in exactly the opposite direction? I look forward to the Minister promising the immediate publication of the report.

If withholding information does not work, the Government can try deceptions, half-truths and smokescreens. Let me give two examples. The Intensive Care Society recently asked about the number of extra intensive care beds that the Government claimed to have created. They were told by the Department of Health that the figure was 100. Then the line changed. No.10 said that there were 100 critical care beds. Then the line changed again. The Prime Minister told Sir David Frost that perhaps about one third were intensive care beds. The answer seems to be different every time the question is asked.

The Secretary of State sent me a letter on 6 January which said that 100 extra intensive care beds had been made available this year. The Secretary of State gave an answer which was factually incorrect. He looks at the letter, which he may well not remember signing. It does say that it was approved by the Secretary of State, and signed in his absence. The information changes from day to day. It is tidal, it comes and goes. There is no such thing as truth under this Government, merely convenience and inconvenience.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): Some tit-for-tat fun always takes place in these debates, but there is a serious point that goes to the heart of the discussion of our national health service—how it should be funded. I ask the hon. Gentleman point blank: does he or does he not support compulsory health insurance to fund the NHS, and does he recognise the great inequalities that that would create?

Dr. Fox: I shall come in some detail to how we intend the service to be funded. However, I do not regard watching the health service deteriorate as tit-for-tat fun. The hon. Lady may do so, and she may regard the litany of failures as entertaining, but I do not find it so.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): My hon. Friend's comments about the claims for the number of intensive care beds changing almost daily may be more prophetic than he realises, because the Government are considering plans to close four intensive care beds in Ashford hospital in my constituency.

Dr. Fox: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point. The Department of Health will doubtless issue a press

release claiming that the number of intensive care beds in that hospital has increased, because there is no such thing as truth or lies in this Government's culture. The information released is what suits them.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will my hon. Friend comment on the proposed closure of the accident and emergency and intensive care units in my local hospital? In answer to questions about the new configuration for hospitals in my area—which will include a 15 per cent. cut in beds—we were told, "We cannot give details because there is no robust medical plan in place yet."

Dr. Fox: That does not surprise me at all. I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned long and hard about intensive care beds and he may wish to raise that issue with the Secretary of State when he makes his speech. It would be interesting to know what plans he has for health care in my hon. Friend's area.

Jean Corston (Bristol, East) *rose—*

Dr. Fox: I shall give way shortly. Yesterday, in what was billed as a great boost and a propaganda coup for the Government, the pay awards for NHS staff were brought forward in a panic measure after the Prime Minister's speech at the weekend. However, the Government failed to understand that NHS staff would spot immediately that the awards were unfunded. This morning, *The Guardian* said that NHS services would be squeezed and *The Mirror* said, graphically:

"Brilliant! But how will nurses be paid?"

The pay award issue goes to the heart of how the Government run our health care. Lord Winston said:

"I think we've been quite deceitful about it. We haven't told the truth and I'm afraid there will come a time when it will be impossible to disguise the inequality of the health service from the general population."

Those are damning words from one of our leading health experts who is also a notable ally of the Prime Minister.

Of all the factors that prevent us from having a meaningful debate on health care, one of the most obstructive is the Government's dogmatic approach to the independent sector. The private sector tells us that, if there had been earlier consultation before the winter flu outbreak, it would have been able to make more beds available for the NHS when it was overstretched. It is the Labour party's dogmatic hatred of the independent sector that makes the Government incapable of any meaningful negotiation with it in the interests of patients.

Jean Corston: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: The hon. Lady must not jump up and down like a demented meerkat. I shall give way in a moment.

The Prime Minister's press secretary, who now doubles as prime ministerial stand-in and as a Treasury spokesman, intervened in the debate today. The Press Association reported:

"Blair rules out tax breaks for private health insurance".

However, it was his press secretary who said:

"We don't have an ideological hatred of the private sector, it's just that we don't see it as a solution to the problems of the NHS."

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): The hon. Gentleman mentioned the pay awards and I can tell him that the nurses will get their pay rise from the biggest boost in spending on the NHS in its history, which this Government have delivered. However, the Conservatives' guarantee to cut taxes, even in a recession, means that if they were in power they would have guaranteed to cut spending on the health service and hand it over entirely to the private sector.

Dr. Fox: That is a bizarre intervention. The hon. Gentleman suggests that health expenditure cannot be increased at the same time as taxes are cut. He does so just two months before the Government cut taxes by 1p to compensate for the stealth taxes that they have already imposed. That is a ridiculous argument.

No one begrudges the nurses' and junior doctors' pay rise, which they thoroughly deserve. However, allocations to health authorities and spending plans were already complete before those fully accepted—but not fully funded—pay rises were announced. So some cuts will have to be made in the allocations for the patient programmes already planned by health trusts and health authorities. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) is grinning, but it is not funny for the people whose services will be squeezed and cut.

Jean Corston: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Fox: Very well, if only so that I can get some peace.

Jean Corston: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, however reluctantly. The Avon health authority provides hospital services for people in my constituency and the hon. Gentleman's. It said today that, despite an average daily increase of 14 per cent. in emergency admissions during the flu epidemic, no health trust had had to refuse emergency admissions. It also said that, although some routine surgery had had to be cancelled, plans were in hand to cut waiting times. Does not that show that the health service for our constituents has responded magnificently to a once-in-a-decade epidemic? Does it not also throw into stark relief the hon. Gentleman's assertion to the Tory party conference that the NHS could only ever provide a second-rate service?

Dr. Fox: The hon. Lady was doing quite well for the first four or five minutes of her intervention. I was going to welcome what she was saying, and I am grateful that her constituents and mine live in the area of a health authority that has coped reasonably well.

However, the hon. Lady said that this epidemic has been the worst in a decade. In reality, it is probably only the fourth worst outbreak in 10 years, and it is not so different from other outbreaks. In any case, why should routine surgery have to be cancelled? Outbreaks of flu in our health care system happen in most years, so why should we be grateful that emergency admissions have not been stopped? The hon. Lady's remarks reveal an almost incredible complacency.

The Secretary of State is second to none in his dislike of independent health care. I have a letter from the former chairman of the St. Helier health trust, describing what happened on Thursday 26 March 1998 at the Department of Health building at Elephant and Castle. He and his

[Dr. Fox]

colleagues were to be lectured on their obligations by the then Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). However, because the right hon. Gentleman was late, the present Secretary of State gave the lecture. The letter states that the Secretary of State admonished the audience to deliver the Government's promise on waiting lists. The letter adds:

"During questions, someone (I think, but cannot be sure, that it was Dr. Tudor Thomas, the Chief Executive of Epsom Healthcare NHS Trust) referred to a satisfactory arrangement his Trust had with a local private hospital."

The present Secretary of State was described as "furious". The letter states that he

"told us all that he would 'come down like a ton of bricks' on anyone who had anything to do with the private sector."

The letter went on:

"I was sitting next to Sir William Rous (sadly deceased) chairman of Kingston Hospital NHS Trust, and he was as incensed as I was at the dogmatic and nonsensical attitude."

That dogmatic and nonsensical attitude persists to this day at the heart of the Department of Health.

The real reason for today's debate is that matters need not be as they are. Up and down the country, doctors, nurses, other health care professionals and voters do not want the NHS to be used as a political football in future. *[Interruption.]* The mechanism for delivering health care in this country need be no more controversial than it is in other developed countries. That is entirely possible.

Today, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and I made an offer to the Government and to the Liberal Democrat party. Three things can be done to remove the national health service from this febrile political atmosphere. First, we offer the NHS a guarantee. It needs long-term stable financing and less political interference. We believe that there should be increased NHS funding year on year in real terms. We believe that there should be improved NHS management, allowing hospitals to get on with the job of treating patients, and no privatisation—instead, as now, there should be a continued commitment to publicly funded health care, free at the point of delivery.

Secondly, the NHS should give patients a guarantee. *[Interruption.]* This is a serious debate; it requires something more than the primary school outing that is being held on the Government Back Benches.

Patients should have a guaranteed waiting time, determined by the clinical priorities of doctors, not the political priorities of spin doctors. There should be an agreement that if the NHS cannot meet the guarantee, independent health care resources should be used. What matters is when patients are treated, not where they are treated or what sector they are treated by.

Overall, our health service requires more resources. We need to increase our expenditure in the NHS—the state-funded sector—and in the private sector. There should be no ideological block to partnership with independent health care providers. I mentioned how the crisis in the health service could have been averted had we used the independent sector better. However, there should be no punishment through the taxation system for those who take out independent health care provision, and we should review the tax treatment of health care costs on companies and individuals. We should create the opportunity to expand total health spending in both the public and personal sectors to reach more quickly the level spent on health by our major European partners.

We believe that a mixed provision in health care will enable us to reach the health outcomes of our European partners, but far more quickly than the target set by the Prime Minister. The dogma of the Labour party, however, prevents us from doing so.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is right to say that the NHS is under great stress. He is also right that the health service does not have enough beds, doctors or nurses. Could he therefore tell the House why his Government cut the number of beds by 40,000 and the number of nurse training places by 2,000 a year, which is what got us into this mess in the first place?

Dr. Fox: The number of doctors in the health service was higher at the end of our term of office than at the beginning—as was the number of nurses. I should have thought that that was record enough. As for nurse training places, I know that the hon. Gentleman knows that the number of nurse training places had already increased for the two years before the Conservatives left office, a trend that is happily being followed by the current Government.

Before we can entertain a proper, mature health debate, we have to accept three basic facts. First, the NHS cannot do everything at a time when medical science is expanding faster than our ability to fund it. Secondly, we no longer have the best health care system in the world—we used to, but we have fallen behind. Thirdly, the NHS has failed as a welfare model, because the poorest in our society have not only the poorest access to health care but the worst health outcomes. That must be addressed.

The Labour party is in a panic over the one issue that it arrogantly and complacently believed was its own. The Secretary of State was undermined by the Prime Minister over the number of intensive care beds. He was in the dark about the Prime Minister's announcement about funding on the David Frost programme. The Secretary of State is no doubt being lined up as the fall guy by the propaganda machine for when the trust ratings fall further.

Before No. 10 starts briefing that the Secretary of State is going to run as mayor of Darlington, and before he plumbs new depths of unpopularity, he has one chance to safeguard and protect his future and that of the NHS. He should drop the dogma, the soundbites and the deception, and should join us in creating a health care system fit for Britain in the 21st century.

4.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"applauds the dedication and commitment of National Health Service staff for their tireless efforts at all times and in particular during the millennium holiday period and the current severe outbreak of flu; welcomes the Government's acceptance of the recommendations of National Health Service Pay Review bodies in full and without staging for the second year, in stark contrast to the practice of the previous administration; notes that, between 20th December and last weekend, there were 350,000 999 calls, over 800,000 attendances at Accident and Emergency departments and there have been over 250,000 emergency admissions; recognises

the vital role in meeting these pressures played by the unprecedented level of planning for the winter, covering health and social services and the extension of NHS Direct to two-thirds of England; welcomes the measures already taken by this Government to increase the capacity of the National Health Service, including increased provision of critical care beds, the modernisation of Accident and Emergency departments, the biggest ever National Health Service hospital building programme, the employment of additional doctors and the recruitment of more nurses, the cuts in in-patient waiting lists, the extra investment to modernise cancer, coronary and mental health services and the commitment to increased investment in and modernisation of the National Health Service; and rejects the Opposition's proposals to privatise the National Health Service."

May I say first that we already have a good mayor in Darlington?

Today's debate is not only about the state of the national health service. As the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) said, it is about the future of health care itself. There are no closed minds in the Government when it comes to radical reform of the NHS. That is precisely what we have been doing for the past two and a half years. The Labour Government made the private finance initiative work in the NHS, and will continue to do so. *[Interruption.]* The Conservative Whip may scoff, but as a consequence of the PFI, 16 new hospitals are being built, some in parts of the country that had been waiting for decades.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), because he, too, is a radical.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The Secretary of State says that there are no closed minds on the Labour Benches. Will he therefore dissociate himself from the comments made by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, who said:

"All private medicine is immoral. I hope all private medicine withers and dies."

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Woodspring have raised the matter of private medicine several times, and are starting to be—

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): Answer the question.

Mr. Milburn: The right hon. Gentleman seems to have a hearing problem. I know that he returned to the House only recently, but if he bears with me, he will hear the answer. The Conservative party is beginning to act as if it were the political wing of the private health insurance movement. Let me make it absolutely clear that no matter how serious the challenges facing the NHS—I readily admit that there are many—a private alternative is not the right remedy for Britain.

Modernisation and the investment that goes with it are the only means by which our health care system can serve the whole nation. No one pretends that there are no problems in the NHS, or that all patients are receiving the care that we all wish them to have. If we thought that nothing was wrong, we would not be working hard to put matters right.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Does the Secretary of State regret the Government's early decision to abolish tax deductibility on private health care insurance for the over-60s? Will he move rapidly to reinstate it?

Mr. Milburn: No, I do not regret that decision. Anyone who reads Lord Lawson's memoirs will gain an interesting insight into the debate that took place between him, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the then Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher, about private health care insurance. In fact, tax relief on private health insurance meant that the number of elderly people who took it out barely moved for seven years. When we abolished it, we put £140 million to much better effect by cutting value added tax on fuel.

Dr. Fox: Why, when all other socialist Governments in Europe see private medical insurance as a supplement augmenting state spending, do our Government, isolated among commentators in the United Kingdom and Europe, believe that it must be an alternative?

Mr. Milburn: It would be an interesting development in the Conservative party if the hon. Gentleman was advocating foisting on the British people the German or French models. The Government do not support that development for reasons to which I shall come shortly. *[Interruption.]* It is not about dogma or ideology but about what works best for Britain.

Nobody pretends that there are no problems in the national health service. The difference between the Labour Government and the previous Conservative Government is that we recognise the problems, and—what is more—we are taking action to tackle them. As I made absolutely clear in my statement to the House eight days ago, the NHS has been under severe pressure this winter. The doctors, nurses and other staff of the health service have done a brilliant job during the past few weeks—the hon. Member for Woodspring is quite right about that. However, to listen to the hon. Gentleman and some of his hon. Friends—and, indeed, some of the more hysterical parts of the media—one would think that the health service had simply ground to a halt. It has not. During the past four weeks alone, there have been more than 350,000 999 calls; almost 820,000 attendances at casualty departments and more than 250,000 emergency admissions to hospitals.

The Conservatives accuse us of mismanaging the NHS this winter. That is not what health service managers are saying. The NHS Confederation describes health service planning for this winter as "excellent" and "unprecedented". Doctors' leaders agree. Dr. Ian Bogle, the chairman of the British Medical Association, said that

"thanks to the high level of planning across the country the NHS is coping."

The hon. Member for Woodspring has been quoting doctors. Let me quote from a letter that I received today from 20 senior clinicians throughout the country—a letter, incidentally, that *The Times* refused to publish. *[Interruption.]* All of a sudden, Conservative Members are keen to listen to doctors' leaders—let them listen to what those doctors have to say. The letter stated:

"To suggest as some commentators have done that the NHS is offering 'third world care' or that the health service failed to prepare adequately for the pressures of winter is incorrect . . . the Government's policy is moving the NHS in the right direction. The NHS represents the fairest and most effective way of delivering

health care. The British people are right to press for it to be properly funded and modernised. To dismantle it would be a disaster we would live to regret."

The letter was from clinicians in London, Birmingham, Cheltenham, north Tyneside and other parts of the country.

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): As we are comparing letters from doctors, will the right hon. Gentleman comment on the letter, dated 15 January, from five consultants at Wycombe hospital that asks him formally to take responsibility for the rundown state of intensive care in this country?

Mr. Milburn: It is undoubtedly true that there has been particular pressure on intensive care beds, despite the fact that we provided extra beds this winter. It is not true, as the hon. Member for Woodspring alleges, that those critical care beds do not exist. They do exist; throughout the country, there are extra intensive care beds and extra high-dependency beds.

Mr. Brazier: What does the Secretary of State say to people in east Kent who face the loss of the accident and emergency unit at the Kent and Canterbury hospital, and a 16 per cent. fall in total bed numbers over the next three or four years?

Mr. Milburn: I shall come to bed numbers in the next sentence or two. However, I point out to the hon. Gentleman and to his Front-Bench colleagues that, every time today's Tories talk about health care, there is an epidemic—an epidemic of hypocrisy and an outbreak of selective amnesia. Nowhere is that more evident than on bed numbers. We shall take no lectures on beds from the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), from his Front-Bench colleagues or from the Conservative party.

The Conservatives cut 40,000 beds from our hospitals during their last 10 years in office. That is why we set up the national beds inquiry—

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): What about the beds inquiry?

Mr. Milburn: I will give the hon. Gentleman the answer, if he will remain patient for a moment or two. I shall publish the results of that national inquiry within the next few weeks. It will make the case for an increase in bed numbers. It will end two decades of orthodoxy and ideology that declared that beds were bad. Modernising the health service means expanding health services.

Dr. Fox *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman for the last time.

Dr. Fox: I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State. As I referred to his letter of 6 January, and as it would be extremely unfortunately to have the Secretary of State or his Department's officials accused of either misinformation or disinformation when the Prime Minister said that there would be 30 extra intensive care beds and the Secretary of State said that there would be 100, will the Secretary of State assure the House that he will publish where those 100 beds are?

Mr. Milburn: I can give the hon. Gentleman some of the details today if that is helpful. There are extra beds at St. Mary's in London; extra beds in Norfolk and Norwich hospital; extra beds in Leicester general; extra beds in Warrington hospital and extra beds in the Royal Victoria infirmary in Newcastle. They are all extra intensive care beds. [HON. MEMBERS: "How many?"] Conservative Members ask "How many?" There will be two at St. Mary's; two at Norfolk and Norwich; one at Leicester general; two at the Royal Victoria infirmary and one extra intensive care bed at Warrington hospital. The hon. Member for Woodspring asked for a full list. He will get a full list when we publish it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Milburn: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment or two, because I always like giving way to him. For the moment, however, I ask him to calm down.

It is the same story when it comes to nurse training: the same amnesia and the same hypocrisy from the Conservative party. The Conservatives say that we have left the NHS short of nurses, but it was the Conservative Government who cut the number of nurse training places by almost 4,000. It is this Government who are increasing the number of nurses, and of nurses in training, with 5,000 more nurses returning to the NHS; 4,500 more training places; and 14,000 more applicants for courses. Just today, the first 140 nurse-consultant posts have been established in all parts of the country.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: No, I will not. I have given way several times. I might give way in a moment or two if the hon. Lady will just calm down.

Let us not forget, either, the two largest real-terms increases in pay that nurses have received in almost a decade and a half. They have been paid in full—and unlike under the Conservative party—without any staging. They are fair pay rises so that we get more doctors and more nurses into the health service and make it more worth their while to stay in it too. Expanding the staff of the health service is the way that we will expand services to patients.

That is one of the differences that the Labour Government are making to the state of the national health service, and I shall tell—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State is not giving way for the moment. Members should know better than to continue to try to intervene.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Member for Woodspring, and the Conservative party generally, are very keen to talk

about mismanagement. Let us talk about it, then. Mismanagement is when one wastes £30 million on legal and consultancy fees for private finance initiative—

Mrs. Gillan *rose*—

Madam Speaker: Order. Let me just get this straight. Is the Secretary of State giving way to the hon. Lady?

Mr. Milburn: No.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. The hon. Lady must resume her seat.

Mr. Milburn: I have given way several times to Conservative Members and I deeply regret the fact that I have. If the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) is patient, I might give way to her at the end of my speech.

Mismanagement is wasting £30 million on legal and consultancy fees for private finance initiative hospital schemes that one could not even get off the ground. Good management is building 16 new hospitals worth £1.3 billion as part of the biggest hospital building programme that the health service has ever seen. That is the difference between this Government's management of the health service and the Conservative Government's mismanagement of it.

The Opposition motion deplores mismanagement. I deplore it too. That is precisely why we have abolished the internal market that the Conservatives created—an insane competition between hospitals that fragmented services and wasted millions. That is why we have ended two-tier care and that is why we are well on the way to moving £1 billion out of NHS bureaucracy and into front-line patient care.

Mismanagement is when a Government, in the name of free-market ideology, turn a blind eye to poor hospital standards and second-rate performance. Good management is when a Government have the courage to establish for the first time an independent inspectorate and a systematic dismantling of the lottery of care. Mismanagement is when in-patient waiting lists rise by 400,000. Good management is when they fall by 87,000. Mismanagement is when a Government leave office with investment in new NHS building, plant and equipment at a 10-year low. Good management is when that investment is at an all-time high. There is more investment in cancer and in GP surgeries, and 150 casualty departments are already being modernised.

Mismanagement is when cancer and cardiac services—the services that deal with our country's biggest killers—are left neglected and under-invested for decades. Good management is when more money is being invested, more doctors are being trained and more operations are being performed. That is the difference that the Labour Government have started to make. More hospitals are being built; more nurses are being recruited; more doctors are being trained and more patients are being treated.

Mr. Bercow: In the light of what the Secretary of State has said, what does he have to say to my constituent, Colonel Bruce Owen from Marsh Gibbon in Buckingham—*[Laughter.]* It is not a laughing matter for him. He suffered a heart attack on 7 July last year, eventually saw a consultant surgeon at Harefield hospital in the middle of November and was told that he would have to wait at least 12 months for the triple bypass surgery that he requires. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell my constituent and the House why that individual, who has saved and who has contributed to this society throughout the 60 years of his life, should have to spend £13,000 of his hard-earned savings on the treatment of which the inadequate health service is currently depriving him?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman raises an important constituency case. I say to him that of course we always regret circumstances in which patients do not get the care that they deserve from the national health service. Let me say to him, however, that it is fatuous to pretend that problems in cardiac services began on 1 May 1997. It is fatuous to pretend that problems in cancer services began on that date. The truth is that for decades the previous Government failed adequately to invest in cancer and cardiac services. They left those services under-invested, under-doctored and under-nursed. That is why we have made those services our top priority for modernisation.

Mr. Blizzard: Has my right hon. Friend noticed that, while Conservative Member after Conservative Member has risen to point out some deficiency in the NHS, all that the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman could offer has been privatisation, privatisation and privatisation? He could not offer the new public resources that the Government are investing because his Front-Bench colleagues described those resources as "reckless".

Mr. Milburn: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an extremely telling point. *[Laughter.]* Conservative Members are laughing now, but they will not be laughing in a moment or two because I am about to turn to that very matter.

We are making progress. The NHS is modernising and changing. There are new services, but there are also severe capacity problems. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) said in an earlier intervention, we need more doctors, more nurses and better services. Sadly, that takes time. It takes three or four years to train a nurse and double that to train a doctor, and it takes more money.

In the past 20 years NHS funding has grown by just 3 per cent. a year. That is the real legacy of the Conservative party. From last April, this Government have raised those levels of investment by a further 50 per cent. There is more money this year; there will be more money next year and more money the year after, but that is just the start. We know that we lag behind the rest of the European Union on health spending. We are determined to close the gap. As the Prime Minister said—

Mrs. Gillan *rose*—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Secretary of State. The right hon. Gentleman is clearly not giving way and the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) must resume her seat.

Mr. Milburn: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said on Sunday, if we can get real-terms

[Mr. Milburn]

increases in funding of 5 per cent. a year, we shall get up to the European level. Our ambition is to have a health service that is doing more than coping. We want an NHS that is growing and modernising.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): If the Secretary of State genuinely believes what he has told the House this afternoon, why is it that the majority of people outside the House do not have the same confidence in the NHS and do not share his confidence in the Government's ability to protect it? I take the right hon. Gentleman back to his point about intensive or critical care beds. He said that there are 100 new beds, but he has been able to identify only eight of them. Where are the other 92?

Mr. Milburn: I shall deal with the hon. Gentleman's last point first. I shall publish the figures on intensive and high dependency beds in due course.

The hon. Gentleman talks about lack of public confidence. Of course there are problems with the NHS. Everybody understands that. The Government are addressing them, but there is a fundamental political debate taking place between the Government and the Opposition about the way in which health resources can grow in future. There are two very different futures on offer.

Everybody knows that we need to spend more money on the NHS, except the members of today's Conservative party. Only the Conservative party could argue that the Government have gone soft on public spending on class sizes and waiting lists. Only the Conservative party could impose on itself the straitjacket of the tax guarantee, which would mean less investment in public services such as the NHS and more investment in the Conservative party's priorities, including top-rate tax cuts for the privileged few.

It is no wonder that the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), said what he did about the tax guarantee. He said:

"To say that you are going to reduce the proportion of taxes to GDP in all circumstances is mad. You simply"—

[Interruption.] That is what the right hon. Gentleman said. I note that Conservative Members are not laughing now. Their former Prime Minister said that that was mad. He then said:

"You simply don't unless you make swingeing cuts in the Health Service."

Those were the words of the last Conservative Prime Minister.

The simple truth is that we are spending more on the Health Service and Conservatives want to spend less.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Milburn: In the process, they want to force more people to go private.

Dr. Fox: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Milburn *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Did I hear the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) say, "On a point of order"?

Dr. Fox: I made the position extremely clear when I spoke. I do not wish the Secretary of State unintentionally to mislead the House. I made it clear to the right hon. Gentleman that our policy—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that that is a point of debate and not a point of order.

Mr. Milburn: I know that it is a narrow judgment call, but if the question is whether I trust most the hon. Gentleman or the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon, I will go with the former Prime Minister.

The Conservatives want to force more people to go private. The hon. Member for Woodspring calls his patients' guarantee a Trojan Horse. I think that that was the phrase he used. We are beginning to see what lies within that horse.

The hon. Gentleman could not have been more explicit in his interview with *The Sunday Times* only two days ago. He boasted:

"Philosophically, we have moved on".

That is, moved on from the NHS. He added:

"Insurance companies could cover conditions that are not high-tech or expensive, like hip and knee replacements and hernia and cataract operations."

Now we know the first set of treatments that the Tories' patients' guarantee would surgically remove from the NHS. Every year—

Dr. Fox: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: Oh no. I shall give way at the end.

Every year a third of a million people have hip, knee, hernia and cataract operations on the NHS. Under the patients guarantee, those 300,000 people would be denied NHS care because the hon. Gentleman thinks that their condition is too trivial. Instead, they will have to pay privately for treatment that they now receive free.

The average cost to the NHS of a hip replacement operation is £3,755. In the case of a knee replacement, the bill rises to £5,157. However, the cost of the operation is only half the picture. If those operations are beyond the pale of the NHS, who pays the bill for the initial consultant referral? The patient pays. Who pays the bill for the pre-operative out-patient assessment? The patient pays. Who pays the bill for community physiotherapy? The patient pays. Who pays the bill for the district nurse visit to remove sutures? The patient pays.

Who pays the bill for the follow-up at six weeks? The patient pays. Who pays at six months? The patient pays. Who pays at 12 months? The patient pays. Time and again, the Conservative guarantee is that the patient pays.

Dr. Fox: Sadly for the Secretary of State, I write the Conservative health policy, not him. He can make up as

much of it as he fancies in his little fantasy world. We intend that patients will get a maximum guaranteed waiting time. Many of the procedures that he mentions are carried out at present through many different independent schemes, including through trade union schemes.

Mr. Milburn: Is the article right?

Dr. Fox: No, it is not right.

Every single time any of those procedures are carried out in the independent sector, it reduces the waiting list in the national health service. The problem is that the Secretary of State is so blinded by his own dogma that he wants to put politics before patients.

Mr. Milburn: I look forward to the retraction in *The Sunday Times*. I presume that even now there is a letter winging its way. Is that right or is it wrong?

Dr. Fox: The Secretary of State is trying to create yet another smokescreen with yet another example of what the Labour party does best—half-truth, misinformation and disinformation. We have made it clear in this debate that we believe in increasing spending on the NHS year on year in real terms. We believe in encouraging as many people as possible to take up independent provision, because that increases the total capacity of health care in this country. It is a shame that the Secretary of State is so intellectually sterile that he cannot accept the argument, as can other socialists in Europe and every commentator in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Milburn: I look forward to reading the letter. The hon. Gentleman did not convince his own side, let alone the House.

Let us have a debate about the merits of private health insurance. I am happy to engage in such a debate. The patients who would be forced to pay private health insurance under the patient guarantee and the tax guarantee are precisely those who could least afford to do so.

Two thirds of patients in hospital are elderly people. Together, the very young and the very old are the biggest consumers of health care in our country, but they are the very people who would be priced out of the health insurance market. The very people who need most care, and the very ones who are most at health risk, are they very people who would be least able to get it.

The second reason why private health insurance is the wrong answer is that it would divert hundreds of millions of pounds that should be spent on the NHS into a huge cash handout in tax reliefs and subsidies.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Milburn: There seems to be some dispute on the Opposition Front Bench. The hon. Member for Woodspring was urging me to reinstate private health insurance subsidies. The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) indicates that that is wrong. Which is it? Is the hon. Member for Woodspring right? I presume he is.

Dr. Fox: I was urging the Secretary of State not to extend national insurance contributions to employers to punish them for giving private health care to their employees, which is enjoyed by a large number of employees in the United Kingdom, many of whom are trade unionists.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman should keep digging because he is doing a good job for us. Today's Conservative party, like that of the 1990s, wants to give a huge cash handout in tax reliefs and subsidies for private medical insurance. Much of that would go to people who already have private medical insurance. The hon. Gentleman quoted the *Daily Mail*, which reported today that the costs of subsidising employers would be £368 million. That is before a single extra person signs up to an extra health insurance policy. That £368 million from the national health service budget is the equivalent of 1,050 intensive care beds or 16,000 nurses. Yet Conservative Members have the gall to claim that their policy is about expanding access to health care. It would be money down the drain.

It is fatuous to pretend, as the hon. Member for Woodspring does, that more private health care would lift the burden from the health service. It would impose an extra burden.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: No. There is no reserve army of unemployed oncologists or cardiac surgeons waiting for a private call to arms.

Mr. Leigh: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Milburn: No. An expanded private sector would mean a contraction of the public sector, which would face higher costs with fewer staff. It would mean a brain drain from the NHS. The Conservatives' proposals on private health insurance are wrong. They affect the wrong people at the wrong cost and have the wrong effect.

Private health insurance, the knee-jerk reaction of the Conservative party, could not provide an efficient or fair health care system. It would take the United Kingdom back to an era when access to health care depended not on clinical need, but on ability to pay. That is not the future for health care in our country. The Government reject the idea that the NHS should be a residual safety net service for the poor, which will inevitably become a poorer service. We reject that not on ideological grounds but because it simply would not work.

Dr. Stoate: How would the private insurance sector respond to people who have chronic conditions such as diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis, or those who have chronic health problems, most of which are excluded from the majority of health insurance programmes?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend, who is a general practitioner, makes a good, telling point. He knows that the private insurance sector would be incapable of insuring the people whose health is most at risk. That is why Conservative arguments are so fatuous. We do not oppose them on ideological grounds [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] We do not. We oppose them because they would not work. There are two possible futures for health care in our country: privatisation with the Conservatives and

[Mr. Milburn]

modernisation with Labour. We have the courage of our convictions. We believe in a comprehensive, modernised and well-resourced NHS, which provides care that is based on need, not ability to pay. We believe in a truly national health service, which is worthy of the name. The people of our country expect that. Tax relief for private health care is not an answer to the challenges of the health service. The answer is a rising level of resources for the NHS, funded through general taxation, in a way that the people can understand and in which they can have confidence. That is the way forward for the modern, 21st-century health service that our nation needs.

The NHS is one of the greatest achievements of the 20th century; it must now undergo one of the greatest modernisations of the 21st century. No matter how much Conservative Members rant and rave, we will not yield one inch to the privatisers of our nation's health. We stand firm for the NHS—not as it is, but as the modern health service that it could be. The nation now knows the choice that it faces—between those who want to privatise the NHS and those who want to modernise it. The nation should know that we will deliver a modern NHS—a new NHS fit to face the challenges of the new millennium.

4.45 pm

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): As we have this debate, the Government have been under fire over the national health service, in the media and politically, for getting on for three weeks. It is hard to think of any occasion since 1 May 1997 on which their spin doctors have so lost control of the agenda that they have found themselves under fire on a domestic policy issue for three weeks solid, but this is largely a mess of their own making. Listening to the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), who introduced the debate on behalf of the Conservative party, one could have been forgiven for thinking that all those problems had miraculously started on 1 May 1997. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

The 18 years of Conservative misrule led to a great many of the problems. It is not the present Government's fault that they inherited a mess, but it is their fault that in three years they have not made more progress in putting some of that mess right. They played the health issue up strongly at the general election, saying that they alone could save the NHS, but what they have done since—certainly in terms of investment in the NHS—has not even kept up with the year-on-year funding increases made by the Conservatives. The changes that they have made, which the Secretary of State described as radical modernisation, have been over-hyped, although some have started down useful tracks. The recent flu crisis, outbreak or wave—whatever hon. Members care to call it; regrettably, I have sampled it from a patient's perspective—validated the warnings given by health managers, doctors, nurses and others about the pressure that the NHS was under. It took the recent outbreak to show the situation in its true light.

Mr. Bercow: Does the hon. Gentleman support the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) who denounced all who work in the independent health care sector, using a word that begins with "b" and ends with "s", or does he agree that that outrageous attribution in *The Health Service Journal* was a profound insult, both to people working in the independent sector and, indeed, to children born out of wedlock?

Mr. Harvey: The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) must speak for himself, but we regard the private sector and the private health insurance industry as perfectly legitimate parts of the health service. If it is possible for them to grow and play a bigger part we are perfectly happy for them to do so, but we cannot conceive of any circumstances in which taxpayer funds should be used to enable that to happen.

The hon. Member for Woodspring introduced the debate in an entertaining knockabout style and with his usual good humour, but I was rather puzzled that, halfway through, he suddenly launched an initiative to stop the NHS being a political football and called for all-party talks on the issue. We have not had an encouraging start, as his speech made precisely that of the NHS. However, if it is possible to get some all-party dialogue going on health, if we are to break certain taboos and accept, for example, that rationing exists, and if we are to debate what the health service can or cannot do and how it is to be funded, we are ready to take part.

I shall look back to the proposals by which the Government invited the nation to measure their performance at the general election. They pledged that they would bring down waiting lists by 100,000 and maintain that they are making progress towards that figure. They have made progress in bringing down in-patient waiting lists, but unfortunately that has been more than outweighed by an increase in out-patient waiting lists from 295,000 at the time of the general election to 513,000 now. The number of people, and the time for which they are waiting, have grown.

The folly of all this is demonstrated by the fact that, according to any health service professional to whom one speaks, the waiting list pledge itself was completely misguided, has caused a distortion of clinical priorities in the vast majority of hospitals, and is not the best measure of the progress that the Government are making in the health service.

Mr. Leigh: The hon. Gentleman mentioned cross-party consensus, and then talked about waiting lists. Will he at least accept—so that we can secure as big a majority as possible for this view—that the NHS is helped, and in no way harmed, if people relieve pressure on it by taking out private health insurance?

Mr. Harvey: I hope that I made it clear that that was my view in my response to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). There is certainly no harm done—indeed, it is welcome—if the private sector can play a part in relieving pressure on the NHS. If people choose to take out private insurance, that is entirely a matter for them and a positive development.

We believe that the private sector could have a growing role in undertaking work commissioned by the NHS, and there is no reason why the reverse should not happen from time to time. The private sector occasionally needs to fall back on the services of the NHS—[HON. MEMBERS:

"Frequently."] Yes, frequently—not least in the case of intensive care, which is one of the aspects on which people have focused over the past couple of weeks.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Does my hon. Friend agree that the private sector should also play a part in the training of nurses and doctors, and contribute financially?

Mr. Harvey: Absolutely. It would be good to see the private sector taking a practical role in training. The idea of private sector contribution to the cost of that is also good in principle, but it is difficult to see how such a charging mechanism would be organised, and we do not know how much it would raise. If a way could be found to make it work, there is no good reason why we should not give it a try.

The Government have established a National Institute for Clinical Excellence to test the clinical effectiveness—and cost-effectiveness—of drugs. That too is a good idea in principle, but we have major misgivings about the remit, especially as it has been changed by means of a statutory instrument. That has brought into play considerations of affordability, which we consider to be properly in the domain of the Secretary of State and the political community. We think that it is for them to decide what the nation can afford.

There is a world of difference between cost-effectiveness and affordability. Something can be extremely cost-effective, but very expensive. It is entirely right to establish a panel of experts to decide what is cost-effective, but affordability must ultimately be a political decision. When it comes to deciding what the nation can afford, the buck must stop with Ministers.

Funding is a major issue that has interested the nation of late. The Government have not been as candid as they should have been about the extra funds that they have invested since coming to office. For the first two years, they stuck to the Conservatives' spending plans. Goodness knows why; I do not for a moment imagine that, in the unlikely event of the Conservatives' having returned to office, they would have stuck to those plans themselves. The Government, however, set themselves an austerity programme, stuck to the Conservatives' targets, and embarked this year on the first of the three years of spending covered by the comprehensive spending review.

If the Government manage to complete those three years and to spend all that has been promised for the NHS, at the end of the full five years they will just about have spent, year on year, more than the Conservative year-on-year increases. If there is a general election after only four years, however, they will not even have achieved that, and their year-on-year increases will not even be as great as those of the Conservatives.

I am glad that, over the last couple of weeks, public attention has turned to the proportion of our national income that we spend on the health service. I am pleased that everyone seems to agree that it should increase. We do not keep up with our European competitors, but, more shockingly, we do not even keep up with America. Many people regard the state-funded health system in America as an emergency back-up, a safety net, a last chance if all else fails. Legion are the stories, probably apocryphal, of people in America who are found at the roadside after accidents and who, unless they have a credit card, or insurance policy, will not be taken in and cared for, yet the Americans spend 6.5 per cent. of their gross domestic product on that emergency, last-resort, back-stop system. We are floundering at a figure that is variously estimated at between 5.5 and 5.8 per cent. of our GDP, so we must do better.

Dr. Stoate: I note the hon. Gentleman's point that the Americans spend about 6.5 per cent. of their GDP on their publicly funded system, but does he agree that they get extraordinarily bad value for money in that 45 million Americans have no health care cover of any sort, that one quarter of all bankruptcies in America are due to unpaid health bills and that health outcomes are, in many ways, disappointing, particularly for the richest country in the world?

Mr. Harvey: I agree. The Americans do not get particularly good value out of either their public or private systems. In total, they spend 14 per cent. of their GDP on the health system. At its best, it is very good, but, overall, I am not sure that it is all that remarkable.

What was remarkable was the Prime Minister's pledge yesterday that the Government would get spending up to the EU average in the course of five days—*[Interruption.]* In five years; I beg the House's pardon. What he promised was remarkable enough. Whether he is any more likely to attain it over five years than over five days, I do not know. Certainly, some of his arithmetic seemed highly dubious. Whether he was supposed to say that, was on message and had been cleared to say it, I do not know. It may have been like his fox-hunting pledge, which he gave when under a bit of pressure at Question Time, but it smacked of a back-of-a-fag-packet calculation.

If the Prime Minister thinks that putting a mere £2 billion a year in over the next five or six years will get us up to the European average, he could not be more wrong, or is he counting these things in the way that the Chancellor of the Exchequer does? The Chancellor would have us believe that, if we put in £3 billion in the first year, another £3 billion in the second year and another £3 billion in the third year, it makes a glorious total of £18 billion.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): The hon. Gentleman referred to the Prime Minister's promise. Can we have an assurance that the Liberal Democrats support that promise?

Mr. Harvey: We do. We wish the Prime Minister well in his efforts to achieve that. If it comes to votes to get the funds in place to do it, he can rely on our support. However, I am still sceptical as to whether he will achieve it.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Did my hon. Friend notice that, towards the end of the Secretary of State's speech, he refused to take interventions? The one matter of substance in his speech was the undertaking to increase spending by 5 per cent.—per cent. of what he did not define. Might it be helpful if my hon. Friend explored what the baseline of the 5 per cent. is and accepted an intervention from the Secretary of State to see whether he could answer that question?

Mr. Harvey: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I was hoping that the Secretary of State might have cast

[Mr. Harvey]

a little more light on the Prime Minister's commitment. I think that the Secretary of State said that there would be an increase of 5 per cent. in real terms. Does that mean 5 per cent. over and on top of normal NHS inflation—that is to say, over and on top of anything that we have heard about to date in any comprehensive spending review? Will the comprehensive spending review that we expect in July factor that all in on top?

When the Prime Minister says that he will put in £2 billion a year, does he mean that he will put in £2 billion in the first year, continue that into the second year, adding £4 billion in that year, and continue that into the following year, adding another £2 billion, making £6 billion in that year? If so, he had only to consult the Chancellor, who could have explained that that adds up to £42 billion. If they put in £42 billion, they might begin to get somewhere near the European average in five years.

Dr. Stoate: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify the Liberal Democrat policy? Does he subscribe to the view of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), who said on a television programme on which he appeared with me last week that he would be happy for income tax to rise by anything up to 10p in the pound over the next 10 years to pay for Liberal Democrat promises? Is that Liberal Democrat policy?

Mr. Harvey: The hon. Gentleman misquotes my hon. Friend, who said that, if we were to reach the European average, the necessary investment would be equivalent to that rate. He was not necessarily advocating such an increase or saying that we could reach the average overnight. However, it will take massive investment to reach.

It would not make sense to reach the average at once, as the principal investment that we have to make is in staff and personnel, who take time to train. As the Prime Minister said, it takes three or four years to train a nurse. However, if he had recognised that three years ago and started a drive to recruit more nurses, they would have been coming on stream this summer and in post to help cope with any influenza epidemic that might occur next winter.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. He is making a powerful point: there is great need for staff and personnel. I draw his attention to the case of one of my constituents—Mrs. Hopkins, of Germansweek—who visited my advice surgery last weekend. She is suffering from frequent bouts of fainting and giddiness, for which her general practitioner referred her to a consultant. The Royal Devon and Exeter Healthcare NHS trust has written to her to say that, although she will have an appointment, she will have to wait 140 weeks. Does my hon. Friend agree that such delays are caused by failure properly to fund the NHS and are an utterly unacceptable national disgrace?

Mr. Harvey: I can only agree with my hon. Friend that it is absolutely disgraceful that anyone should have to wait 140 weeks—almost three years—simply to see a consultant. Goodness knows how many weeks after seeing a consultant one would have to wait for any operation that the consultant might think necessary. The case that he describes is about the worst that I have heard, and underlines the fact that, whatever progress is being made on in-patient figures is more than counterbalanced by the extra time that people are waiting on out-patient lists. As he says, it is an absolute disgrace.

In recent years, there has been a staggering decrease in the number of nurses working in the NHS. In 1987, there were 514,600 nurses and midwives working in the NHS; today, there are only 373,000. It is incredible that there should have been such a decrease in only 12 or 13 years. Currently, 15,000 nursing vacancies are being advertised, and we are struggling to fill them.

A great deal more will have to be done than yesterday's pay increase—welcome though that was—to turn the nursing profession into something that people are attracted to at the start of their career and will stay with loyally throughout their working lives as they try to build careers. Year after year, many pay increases will be required. Better still, if we are to make necessary progress in recruiting nurses, there should be a complete re-evaluation of our views on the nursing profession and of the value that we place on it both in the NHS and in society overall.

On how pay rises will be paid for, it has been noted that health authorities were given their budgets for the coming year just before Christmas. The Minister has made it clear that the rises will have to be paid for out of those budgets.

Kali Mountford (Colne Valley): Given the hon. Gentleman's comments on nurses and the length and cost of nurse training, will he congratulate the Government and nurses on the number of nurses who have chosen to return to the profession? They are ready to be on the job on the very day of their return.

Mr. Harvey: I am delighted that some nurses have been attracted back to the job, and of course I congratulate the Government on any nurses whom they have managed to lure back or recruit to the profession. Last year, the Government increased pay for those who are on the starting levels in the nursing profession, and that was a useful start. This year, Ministers are beginning to deal with various anomalies. However, there is much further to go before the nursing profession will look sufficiently attractive to persuade people to spend an entire career in it.

How will the pay rises be funded? The increases in authority budgets that were announced before Christmas mean that there is enough cash to fund the pay rises, but if they are to be fully funded from those budgets, something else has to give. Will it be progress on waiting lists or the Government's modernisation agenda? Whatever the authorities and trusts sacrifice to fund the pay increases, the result will be slower progress on improving the health service in the way that we all want and more cases of the kind that my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) mentioned.

Dr. Brand: Will not the health authorities that received the lowest uplift in their funding for next year find it particularly difficult to pay the salary increases? They will have to make cuts in services rather than just failing to advance them.

Mr. Harvey: My hon. Friend is right to point out that there are great inequalities between different health

authorities around the country. I am glad that there is a review of the formulae and I hope that the difficulties faced by rural health authorities in particular will be better recognised. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland use formulae that recognise those difficulties better than the English system.

On top of the difficulties with nursing that we have already dealt with, the Government are spending an increasing amount on agency nurses to make up for the shortfall in NHS nurses. Between 1991 and 1998, spending on agency nurses doubled to £216 million. In the past year, that figure has increased by more than 25 per cent. It now costs the taxpayer more than £273 million to bring in private sector agency nurses, most of whom have been trained in the NHS, to cover NHS vacancies that would not exist if we were paying our nurses properly and recruiting adequate numbers into the profession. That is not good value for the taxpayer.

The Conservatives have been talking up the benefits and advantages of the private health sector and private insurance. I have made it clear that we think that there should be a mixed economy and that both sectors can play a useful role, but they seem to imagine that it is possible to engineer a massive increase in the number of people taking up private health insurance. There is a competitive market for private health insurance. I am sure that other hon. Members, like me, receive direct mail fliers from health insurance companies almost every week touting their wares and policies.

There is no reason why there should be a big increase in take-up unless there is a policy to engineer one. There are three possibilities: it might be made compulsory to take out private insurance, there might be a tax incentive, or the NHS might be run down to such a pitiful state that people would be bound to take out private insurance because they would regard it as the only way to get any health cover. If the Conservatives want a financial inducement, we shall oppose them head-on. There is no justification for taxpayer funds that could otherwise be spent on the NHS to bring about the improvements that people want being diverted to induce people who can afford, or are on the verge of being able to afford, private health insurance.

We know from last year's Budget that there is to be another 1p reduction in income tax from April. We have conducted opinion polling on that, as have some newspapers. The results show that the public do not want a 1p tax cut to be put ahead of getting extra investment into the health service. Nearly 80 per cent. would rather have the money spent on the health service now than on a 1p tax cut in April.

Our call to the Government—who made promises at the general election and have done so over the past three years, with the Prime Minister making more promises the other day—is that they should get on with carrying out those promises and achieve the target of reaching European average spending. Only then, having achieved that for all to see, should they imagine that taxpayers want to enjoy the dividend of a tax cut. They are putting the wrong value on those matters, and they do not understand what people want. If they do not wake up to that soon, there will be a huge price to pay.

5.10 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I welcome the opportunity of today's debate. We are all aware of the difficulties facing the NHS. It is important that we discuss them, and that we contrast the Government's attitudes in terms of policy with those of the Opposition.

At the outset, I should make clear that I am the constituency Member of Parliament of Mrs. Mavis Skeet, whose case received a great deal of coverage in the national press last week. I should make it clear that I do not have the family's permission to go into the details of the case. However, I spoke to the Secretary of State last week about my concerns over the handling of the case. I hope that, with the family's consent, at some point he will make public the outcome of his investigations into her treatment.

I came into politics to fight to ensure that people such as Mrs. Skeet receive proper treatment. I am sure that most Labour Members, and some Opposition Members, would want to ensure that such problems do not arise. I am driven, in part, by my personal experiences, which I have shared with the House before—my father faced a two-year wait for a heart bypass and died before he got the operation—so I understand how families in such circumstances feel. It will not only be Mrs. Skeet; others will be going through difficulties of this nature.

Dr. Tonge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hinchliffe: With respect, I shall not take interventions. I know that many hon. Members wish to contribute, and the hon. Lady may well have the opportunity to make her own point.

Let us not deny the fact that the NHS faces serious problems. As the Chairman of the Select Committee on Health, I would not deny that, as we see those problems. Most hon. Members looking at their local health services would accept that there are difficulties. However, those problems have not developed overnight and will not be cured overnight. The problems have occurred over a long period. It is easy to blame previous Governments. When we talk about how the health service is run, however, we should understand that today's policy changes will not impact in many areas for five or 10 years, or more.

The current difficulties underline elements of Labour's inheritance on health policy and what we faced when we came to power. I want to make clear one or two areas for which I think the previous Government are responsible in terms of the current difficulties and those that we shall no doubt face again in the months and years to come.

First, the previous Government broke down the national service that we had had since 1948 into numerous competing fragments. We inherited the hugely expensive bureaucracy of the internal market—a wasteful exercise introduced by the Tories, where money that should have been spent on patient care was spent on chasing pieces of paper. Secondly, under the Conservatives, the national health service was heading rapidly in the direction of American-style private medical care. There is no doubt about that. The policies that they introduced included tax breaks for private medicine—mentioned again today—the wholesale privatisation of community care provision and two-tier access, which was clearly the case in my constituency. I have named constituents in the past who were denied certain services that their next-door

[Mr. Hinchliffe]

neighbours could get because they happened to have a non-fundholding rather than a fundholding GP. That was the reality of Conservative policies.

Having spent time talking to health service staff, I know that we had a demoralised staff who were leaving the service in droves—often to go to the private sector, which was expanding under the Tories—because they believed that the NHS had no future.

I welcome many of the positive steps that the Government have taken to return health to the vision of Bevan and the socialist pioneers to whom I look in terms of where I want the health service to go. If we stick to those principles, the majority of people will support the steps that we take. I welcome the increased funding that the Government have been able to devote to health recently. Indeed, although I suspect that people will feel differently about tax in two months' time, I would be happy for the Chancellor to cash in on the current concerns of people who would be prepared to forgo the reduction in income tax if the money were devoted to the NHS.

I welcome the proposals in the Health Act 1999, which largely abolish the internal market. The duty to co-operate is common sense and will return the health service to what it was in the beginning. However, will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State consider further the splits in responsibility at local level between the different elements that we inherited? My constituency has seven different elements dealing with health and community care, not including primary care. Many of those bodies could be combined.

I also welcome the Government's moves to emphasise quality of provision, because I have come across some worrying problems in my work on the Health Committee in recent years. It is early days yet, but I commend the results so far. I also welcome the emphasis on primary care, which was part of Bevan's vision but has never been realised, and the proposals for public health and prevention. That was a non-issue for the Conservative Government, but it is crucial in addressing the problems that people face.

I welcome the staffing strategy, the recruitment work that the Government have undertaken, and their work on winter pressures. I know that we have recently had some problems, but they would have been far worse without the Government's steps to prepare local agencies to work together. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and his team know that I welcome the work they have done on bringing the NHS and social services closer. As someone who worked before 1974 in a local authority with a health department, I think that my right hon. Friend should go further and consider full integration of the NHS with local authority social services. He will know that the Health Committee also recently recommended that approach.

The debate this week has been about more than simple practical proposals. It has been about the fundamental issue of whether we as a society can afford a national health service. The great and good have been wheeled out on both sides. For example, Mr. Roy Lilley suggested at the weekend that we penalise smokers and obese people. He did not mention that obesity and smoking are most common among the poorest and most disadvantaged in our society, as I know from my constituency.

Private health insurance has also been mentioned, but no thought has been given to the fact that many people with pre-existing conditions, or of a certain age, would never get private cover. What would they do? They are why we have a national health service in the first place, and we should be proud of that. Regardless of people's background, class, income, social status or health problems, they receive equal treatment in the NHS. That is the objective that we set back in the 1940s.

We have heard consistently during this Parliament the Tories' belief that expanding the private health sector is the only way forward for health provision. Last week, the shadow Secretary of State was quoted in *The Sunday Times* as saying:

"The Conservatives are no longer concerned with the maintenance of the NHS as the primary provider".

That is on the record in the paper—*[Interruption.]* The Tories may be sending letters to *The Sunday Times*, but that quotation is there in print and available in the Library. We know about the Tories and the NHS. They never believed in maintaining the NHS right from the start, but their obsession with the private sector ignores reality.

My views on the private sector are not based solely on ideology. I am concerned with the practical effects of expanding the private sector. The Select Committee was unanimous in its concern over the private sector's abysmal record in quality of provision. In one instance, I was accused of using strong language, but where I come from we call a spade a spade, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) will confirm. We say what we mean, and people respect us for it. I was criticised for comments that I made after listening to a man whose wife had been treated in a private hospital. He told me that, when she died, he had to lay out her body because there was no one else to do it. I admit that I was angry about what I consider to be an unforgivable situation. If I had time, I could give other examples of the lack of quality in the private sector. The Opposition take no account of the genuine unease—even within the private sector—about the standards of the care that that sector provides.

The Select Committee report examined staffing levels, and our finding was clear: staff haemorrhaged from the NHS are going to the private sector, where they get more money and sometimes enjoy better conditions of service. We concluded that expanding the private sector merely removes staff from the national health service. It is nonsense, therefore, to suggest that it is somehow helpful to expand the private sector. It is helpful only if, for political reasons, the NHS is to be run down. That is the Tory party's approach.

I urge the Government to go in the opposite direction and bring about, at the very least, the complete separation of the NHS from the private sector. I should be interested to find out what impact there would be on waiting lists if part-time NHS consultants worked full time and cared for people on the basis of need and not ability to pay.

Finally, I want to let the House into a secret: before last Friday morning, I had never heard of Lord Winston, even though I know most of the great and good in the national health service. Moreover, the man from BBC national radio who telephoned me on Friday morning for a comment had never heard of him either, so it was not just a matter of me being a thick Yorkshireman.

No one is sure of what Lord Winston meant or said, but he appeared to suggest that a middle road—some sort of third way, perhaps—existed between the state system

and the private sector. I believe that, in this instance, there is no such third way. Either one believes in the national health service concept and subscribes to its principles, or one does not. The Tories have shown today that the Government believe in that concept, and that they do not.

5.23 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) rather wrecked his credibility with his display of ignorance about Lord Winston. However, I shall follow his example and be brief.

The trouble with the speech by the Secretary of State was that it offered nothing to the public. The House should recognise that people are genuinely worried about the present state of the health service. The right hon. Gentleman rejected all new thinking and ideas—a ridiculous approach to adopt. The Government must accept that they alone are to blame for the criticism heaped on them in the past few weeks.

No party could have done more to exploit the inevitable difficulties that occur in the health service than the Labour party in opposition. I was Secretary of State for Health and Social Security for six years. My abiding memory is that the Labour Opposition opposed all changes in the service—even the introduction of general managers, which the Labour Government have now adopted. It is a bit rich, therefore, for the Secretary of State to say that he believes in good management of the national health service.

However, that Labour Opposition did more than just attack the then Conservative Government. They also raised the public's expectations. Their promise was specific: vote Labour, and the problems of the health service would be ended. That message has now been radically altered. The promise is that if people vote Labour, the problems may be over in 10 years' time. The angry reaction to that change of position is not surprising.

The issue today is whether we continue down this dismal road of political recrimination and simply continue the party battle of slogans, or whether we have a serious debate on a better way forward for the health service. I have no doubt that that is what the public want us to do. There may be some very important interest groups in the health service, but what the public—the patients—want should be crucial. I think that the public want a serious debate about how to achieve better health care.

I should mention that I am chairman of Numark, an industrial provident society with more than 1,300 community pharmacies. Having declared that interest, I intend to speak not about pharmacy, however tempting it may be, but more generally.

In the years since 1947, the health service has developed steadily under Governments of both colours. When the Prime Minister says that today more patients are being treated, more operations are being carried out and more hospitals are being built, that is precisely the case that I put forward 15 years ago. It was the case that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) put forward when he was Secretary of State for Health, as, I am sure, did my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney) when he was Under-Secretary of State for Health. It was true then and it is true today. However, it does not answer the fundamental question of whether enough patients are being treated or enough operations carried out.

This country has the best-value health service in Europe. By that I mean that we get more value for the money that we use than any other health service that I know of. That is a tribute to the doctors, nurses, staff and managers of the national health service. However, running a cost-effective health service is no longer enough. The public expect more, and I think that they are right to do so. The most important principle of the health service is that no one should be deprived of health care because of lack of income. Whatever other judgments are used on who will have health care, the question of a man or woman's income does not enter the equation. That remains fundamental. No one wants a system in which people are excluded from health care provision because of lack of income.

Increasingly, people feel that in addition they should not be deprived of self-evidently important health care because of a lack of resources in the health service. The dilemma was most famously put by Enoch Powell, who said that any health service faces the problem of infinite demand meeting finite resources. That is the dilemma of the health service in this country and anywhere else. No system is perfect; equally, it does not have to be as imperfect as ours. It is clear from the cases that have been widely reported over the past few weeks that people who should be treated are not being treated. No one, whatever their political party, wants that.

The real question is how to bring those extra resources into the health service. How do we ensure that those resources are best used? The issue should be about how to achieve the best possible health care for the maximum number of people. In achieving that, we should consider all the options. That is where I quarrel with the Government. It is not written in stone that general taxation is the only means whereby money can be raised for the health service. That is not a fundamental principle of the health service—it is simply the way that it has always been.

I remember talking to Margaret Thatcher about the health issue before the 1987 election. She thought that a royal commission on health was the way forward. That was unusual, because Margaret Thatcher was not renowned for appointing royal commissions—I could put it more strongly than that. In the event, no commission was appointed, but today, three years after the 1997 election, the case for an inquiry—at least—into the financing of the health service is overwhelming. A royal commission or some other independent and authoritative inquiry would allow us to consider all the options by which we could bring extra resources to health.

We can continue to make the health service entirely dependent on general taxation. That seems to be the approach taken by the Prime Minister, and by the Secretary of State, who says that there is no alternative to public spending, which will bring us up to European standards, not now, but in six to eight years' time. There are strong arguments against that course. Of all the health slogans that I can think of, "The health service is safe in the hands of the Treasury" would certainly be the oddest. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe is sitting behind me, so I shall be gentle, but the idea that the Treasury is populated by kindly Ministers and officials eager to resource health care is somewhat fanciful. Public spending has not resourced the health service adequately to date. That fact is a commentary not on the present or the previous Governments, but on all the Governments of the past half century.

[Sir Norman Fowler]

If we make health an overwhelming public spending priority, other priorities such as education, law and order, defence and pensions will suffer. To rely exclusively on general public spending is a triumph of hope over experience. We should look at other options. One possibility is a health tax, which might have the advantage of creating some connection between the taxpayer and the health provider. Another option is to raise revenue by some form of personal insurance to add to public funding from tax. Many European countries already use that system, and it is both foolish and depressing to reject that prospect out of hand. It is wrong to suggest that that system would Americanise—or even privatise—the health service.

In Germany, I am told, there have been many television pictures of patients in Britain lying on trolleys and so on. Newspaper comment in Germany has been not about how wonderful the British health service is, but about how the Germans do not want our system of shortages. We deceive ourselves if we think that the rest of the world regards the method by which we finance our health service as the way it should be done. People in other countries may well say that our doctors, nurses and other staff are dedicated professionals who make the most of every penny. I hope that they do, and they would be right to say so, but no one advocates moving towards our system of finance.

I fear that, if we do not seek new paths, in 10 years' time we shall still be debating these problems in the same depressing way. There is no doubt that the old national health service has achieved a vast amount and, having served as Health Minister for six years, I certainly applaud that. But we need change. We need a new national health service, possibly run as a separate commission, but certainly receiving new and consistent streams of income. Such a service could achieve so much more. The Government have turned their face against change, and I deplore that. If they do not alter that stance, my party will rise to the challenge. The present crisis, following past crises, provides an opportunity to think anew.

5.34 pm

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): In view of the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) and by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), perhaps I should point out that I have known Lord Winston for many years. I first met him in 1984, when he was Robert Winston and I was a Member of the House, helping to talk out a Bill sponsored by Enoch Powell, which would have stopped research into the human embryo and thus into infertility. At that time, I thought that Robert Winston was a brilliant clinician and, having considered the events of the past few days, I still think so, although he is now a politician—we are led to believe.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) has left the Chamber, because I quite enjoyed the earlier knockabout over his and the Opposition's perceptions of NHS funding. When he got down to his three ways to save the NHS, which I understand have been expressed in a letter from the Conservative party to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and Members in other parties, he mentioned two points in particular. The first was that the Conservatives wanted long-term funding of the NHS. The second was that they wanted increased funding year by year. That was not our experience during the last five years of the previous, Conservative Government. [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes, it was."]

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield said that the Conservatives had built hospitals every year. Under the Tory Government, they did not build hospitals for many years. What really happened was that they cut back savagely on capital expenditure in the NHS—not £10 million or £15 million but hundreds of millions of pounds. That was the amount that they cut from capital expenditure during their last three years in office. Consequently, my right hon. Friends who have held the position of Secretary of State for Health have had to use the private finance initiative to restore some of the savage cuts to building in the NHS. For the Conservatives to say that they built hospitals is absolute nonsense.

Mr. Martlew *indicated assent.*

Mr. Barron: My hon. Friend agrees. He and I were involved in many debates on the NHS.

At a fringe meeting at the Conservative party conference, the hon. Member for Woodspring said:

> "I think what we are proposing will revolutionise private health insurance in the way we revolutionised pensions in the 1980s."

When the Labour Government came to office in 1997, they had to put right many wrongs; for example, the case of my constituents who had been robbed by going into private pension schemes. The Government had to set up schemes so that people could get back the money that had been taken off them by private pension plans. After the Conservatives were defeated in 1997, I thought that they would have learned something, but they have learned nothing from the way they ran the Government—getting citizens into a mess.

In relation to the announcement that was made just before Christmas, my own health authority—the Rotherham health authority—received an increase of 7.28 per cent. That is a real-terms increase of 4.6 per cent. It is the best increase for many years—since long before May 1997. That real increase will do something about the real problems in our area.

During the past few weeks, we have seen vested interests at play in the NHS and in politics. We know that the Opposition have a vested interest; in theory, it is to oppose. They claim that the NHS is not just in acute crisis, but that it has been brought to its knees. I do not believe that, nor does anyone working in the NHS.

Since 1997, the Government have been changing the way money is spent in the NHS. They have built up public health services and supported primary care groups. They have spent money on services that were formerly poor relations in the NHS. They have deliberately done all that to try to improve public health so that we can hope that, in 10, 20 or 30 years' time, there is not the need for an acute sector of the size it is today.

Our debates on the national health service always concentrate on hospitals and repairing people who have been damaged or who have become the victims of circumstances, but they are not sensible debates about promoting public health. The Government have rightly targeted the biggest killers, such as cancer and

heart disease. They have spent money on those diseases, but they have been criticised for doing so. I think that such criticism is wrong.

The Government have reduced waiting lists. I do not care what anyone says about that. Waiting lists peaked in April 1998 and they have fallen by 18 per cent. since then. Hon. Members can come to the Chamber to say how long X and Y have waited, but they should talk to the people who are waiting for less time now than they were in April 1998. They will say that the Government are doing the right thing.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Barron: I might give way in a minute.

The Government are improving joint action between local health authorities and local authorities to improve care for people in the community with disabilities and to improve mental health care. We have waited years for such an agenda and for joint co-operation. Money has gone into that as well as into the modernisation of the national health service.

Since 1948, the health service has been riven by an internal debate between hospitals and general practitioners and between the acute sector and primary care. The Government are taking those issues on. Such action is perceived to hurt some people and especially those who work in the acute sector. They do not like what is happening. Their empires are being realigned, but the Government are absolutely right to realign them and I will defend them when they do. When we hear from the vested interests and organisations involved in hospital care, we must always remember that the Government's aim is to improve public health and the health of the nation.

The Government are modernising the national health service. None of the new money—as much as it is—that is going into health authorities such as my own is being given to them so that they can continue to spend in the way they did in the past. Packages tell them that they must spend differently. The Government are also making the health service more modern by improving information technology and using such wonderful technology for the general good.

The Government are improving clinical practice. They are not just putting money into the national health service, but are making sure that it is spent properly. Let us forget about the cost of the private sector; let us instead examine the reference costs on which the Government reported a few weeks ago. They considered the actual costs of certain procedures in the health service and clinical outcomes, so that, after 50 years of its existence, we can begin to have an idea of what goes on in the NHS.

A press release in the Library provides three examples of reference costs. It shows how we should be able to ensure better care and get the most effective use of resources. I have suffered from lower back pain over the years, and the press release shows that one course of treatment for that can cost £638 in some hospitals, but that the costs rise elsewhere to £1,578. We ought to know why.

Day care for rheumatoid arthritis can cost £183 in some hospitals but £370 in others. The national health service should provide that service, but there should not be such a difference in costs. The costs of bronchial pneumonia emergency admissions range from the lowest figure of £828 up to the highest, £1,617. Wherever it comes from, that is taxpayers' money that is spent on health care, but there are great cost discrepancies in the national health service. The Government are absolutely right to look into such matters, which concern people who work in the health service because such examination requires them to consider their costs, their use of resources and their clinical effectiveness. Numerous measures are being taken to improve clinical effectiveness.

I know from my experience in this House that any Member can go to the Library and read reports from the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Commission about expenditure in our health service and many other areas of public life. Those reports reveal extraordinary divergences of cost and expenditure.

I remember a report about procurement in the NHS, which was published about four years ago. I have it in my office. It told how a hospital, which was not identified, bought a syringe drive for £800 from a manufacturer in October of the year concerned. The following March—in the same financial year—another department in the same hospital bought a syringe drive from the same supplier for £1,036. That department was trying to get rid of its annual budget by the end of March because in April it was to get another departmental budget. The report showed that procurement practices in the NHS are costing us tens of millions of pounds per annum.

I am all in favour of the Government putting new money into the NHS, and I am pleased that my health authority has received a big increase of 4.66 per cent. in real terms for the next financial year. However, I am also concerned to ensure that the health service is spending money properly in the most cost-effective and clinically effective way. I am unconvinced that it is doing so.

I turn now to a vested interest. The Secretary of State quoted a letter that was sent to *The Times* but which was not published today. In that letter, clinicians were saying that the situation was not as bad as it was being painted in the media. I do not think that the situation is that bad; nor do most people who know the national health service.

A front page article in *The Times* today contains a quote that I assume is connected with the increase that nurses have received this year. As the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) said, nurses received a big increase this year and last year, which is aimed to sustain nurses and to get more of them back into the NHS. We should all be pleased about that increase. The quote in *The Times* is from Dr. Ian Bogle, the chairman of the British Medical Association, who said:

"Doctors' pay is now seriously out of line with other professionals. It needs to be restored to the appropriate level."

When I read that, it took me back to the years before I came to this House—the '70s—when the then Labour Government were giving flat-rate increases to people who were poorly off because they wanted to try to make work pay for them. At that time others asked, "What about our differentials?" I hope that I have not misquoted Dr. Bogle or the BMA, but if that is their line, we have returned to the argument about differentials.

We should all—doctors and nurses included—be concerned about having a health service that provides for this nation. We should forget about vested interests in society, and some of the vested interests in the NHS ought to be removed. We ought to be improving clinical effectiveness and spending resources better.

[Mr. Barron]

Conservative Members sit there smiling because they have been in government and they refused to start the modernisation that this Government have introduced. This Government certainly have my support.

5.48 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): This is the third time in less than 12 months that I have taken part in a health service debate. I therefore hope to make it my shortest speech because I want to hear the remarks of many of the other hon. Members who wish to take part in this short debate.

Looking back on what I said before, I find that I warned about the impending sense of crisis in the national health service. I said that unless the Government shook themselves out of their complacency, they would take us into a series of winter crises like those that we have seen before. It gives me no pleasure to say that that is exactly what has happened because the response on previous occasions has been a combination of complacency and slogans—until the Secretary of State now finds himself in a serious position.

It is certainly true, as the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) said, that we have experienced winter crises before. That is all the more reason for predicting them when we realise that things are going wrong. It was no remarkable insight on my part or that of the other hon. Members who spoke in those earlier debates to talk of an impending crisis. Any Member of Parliament who kept in touch with the NHS would have received repeated warnings about the mounting problems, mainly financial, in health authority after health authority.

Long before this winter began, every Member of Parliament was receiving an increased burden of correspondence from people complaining about the steadily deteriorating service that they were receiving. The Government's response was a party political debate. There was almost a complete absence of constructive long-term policy to address the problem. I am not sure that they are accepting even now that they have had a bad winter, after a predictable increase in flu cases hit a vulnerable system. Having listened to them, I think that they have returned with more complacency and slogans for the future.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: I shall not give way only because of the pressure of time. I usually enjoy giving way.

I shall outline why I think we face the present crisis, what the short-term causes have been and what the immediate response should be. I believe that the principal underlying cause of the present problems is financial. Indeed, it is a financial crisis. As I have said before, the Government got the money wrong. They have set about tackling public expenditure problems in a most peculiar way, which has damaged the health service most especially.

It is not true that the Government followed for the first two years the spending plans that a Conservative Government would have followed. That is a slogan, but it is untrue. We had annual spending rounds during which Secretaries of State for Health discussed with the Treasury the current situation in the health service and what it would be reasonable to spend in the light of economic circumstances during the next year.

I do not believe that any Conservative Secretary of State for Health ever accepted that in years two and three there would be handed out what had been pencilled in during previous years. It was the now candidate for mayor of London, the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), who had the unfortunate experience while Secretary of State for Health of being told that that was exactly what would happen to him. If a Major Government had been returned to office, I do not believe that we would have contemplated anything of that sort.

The idea that health service expenditure would be fixed for three years in that way and never revised has been addressed only in the final years of this Parliament. As the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) has said, if the Government stick to their present plans they will, at the end of this Parliament, get back to a percentage increase in NHS spending that matches that of the former Conservative Government. That illustrates what was wrong; the Government made no attempt to address what was going on.

It is not true that the Government were constrained by public sector debt problems, for example. They simply went to a slogan-based approach to public spending that bore no relation to the needs of the NHS.

What has been the Government's reaction so far? I watched the Prime Minister on the Frost programme, and it seems that the Government have come up with another slogan. It seems that £21 billion is now discredited. I shall not repeat the excellent description of the way in which that ridiculous figure was arrived at that the hon. Member for North Devon gave the House. No one outside the House believes that the figure is an honest description of the Labour party's spending plans. Lord Winston is not the only one with doubts.

We now have not a three-year but a five-year target. When the next three years have passed, we shall have expenditure on the NHS that equals average percentage GDP across the European Union. That target does not address the needs of the service or priorities within government. It is a slogan that has already been produced for the next election campaign. Whether it is realised depends on many unforeseeable events, most of which are utterly beyond the Government's control. To what extent will our GDP grow over the next few years? Many European Governments are trying to reduce their health expenditure. To what extent will their GDPs grow? What rate of increase in expenditure will in practice be the outturn in other European countries?

At present, no one can seriously guess what the average percentage of GDP spent on health will be throughout the European Union. Nobody knows what our GDP will be. We have only a press release for a Frost interview, not a serious and fresh look at the funding needs of the NHS. The police service, which has also been badly dealt with by the Government, and the education service, which thought that it was the first priority, have already started saying, "What does this mean for us?" If EU average expenditure on health races ahead or if United Kingdom GDP dips, what will happen to our claims for our needs? The Government's approach is absurd.

The Government should not adhere to their present three-year comprehensive spending review without revisiting it. It was a dreadful mistake to give up annual spending rounds, and the NHS is one of the victims. It is impossible to set in stone arbitrary targets for spending and not allow the Secretary of State to revisit them. I do not believe that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government will stick to their published plans for this year, next year and the year after, whatever the next comprehensive spending plan produces.

The Prime Minister had the nerve to say, correctly, that the problems of the NHS should be tackled by a combination of money and reform. I think that we are all agreed upon that. Quite a few Conservative Members have taken part in various attempts at reform in the past, and reform is further needed. The difficulty is that the Government's approach to reform so far has been essentially slogan-based and extremely political. It is a rather short-term reaction to what they inherited. When genuine new ideas are put forward for the medium or longer term, the Government are deeply resistant to contemplating any fresh look at how the health service might be financed or run.

Lord Winston said that the Government have not told the truth about the abolition of the internal market. Only the Labour party calls it the internal market. I am glad to say that the Government do not tell the truth when they claim that they have abolished the former arrangements. They have kept the purchaser-provider divide and much of the management information. They tell the hon. Member for Wakefield that they have abolished the internal market. Actually, they still have it in place. In fact, they are messing about with it in a somewhat ill thought-out way. I believe that when the Government's reforms are handed over, they will not be in a state of perfection. We made dramatic changes to the way in which the NHS was run and it could reasonably be expected that there would be continued evolution from where we were—but evolution was certainly required.

The purchaser-provider split gives distinct people in the health service, particularly GP practices, health authorities and advisers to patients, the chance to question what health needs are most dominant locally and how best to commission the highest standard of care delivery. That is what purchasing the service means. Someone examines the greatest priority need and decides how to use resources to meet it.

Providers are able to respond to demands. Slogans such as "Let us go for co-operation and not competition" have been used as an excuse for inhibiting the ability to switch from one source to another so that those involved might have a choice in how they best provide the service in their locality. That should not have happened. I have talked in the past about the replacement of GP fundholding with primary care trusts. It was a retrograde step, which has reduced the role of GPs.

NHS Direct was set up far too rapidly. The new Secretary of State was dominated by consumerism when he first took office. I do not mind being dominated by that, but NHS Direct may or may not work. It is a rather ill-tried concept. Money is being put into it when funding is not obviously readily available. The danger is that that will increase expectations of, and demands on, the service without proving to be an effective way forward. It is costing money and staff at a time when that expenditure could be better directed elsewhere by others in the service.

I shall comment briefly on other reactions to the crisis. The nurses' pay settlement has been mentioned. I am glad that the Government stick with the review body system, which they used so to dislike and which they inherited from the Conservative Government. Of course, it is nice to be able to implement a review body award in full straight away. The Government make the point that we did not do so and that we used to phase awards. We phased them because we used to have regard to the ability of the service to afford the pay increase that was to be introduced.

We always implemented review body awards in full. However, it would have been irresponsible to say to health authorities, "We are now going to implement the pay award in full when we know that you do not have the funds." The Government, who panicked over the weekend about the health service, have done just that. They believe that, as it is in local areas that they will carry the consequences of a diminished ability to deliver the service, they can have their press release now about how they are implementing pay increases in full and straight away.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) said most of what I wished to say about the longer term, and I have taken up my time speaking about the shorter term, but I could not put it better than my right hon. Friend has already done.

Every time an Opposition Member speaks about change, we are accused of wanting to privatise the NHS. That sterile argument is ridiculous. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) made it clear that we are committed to the NHS, to its principles and to increased expenditure on it. We wish to explore ways in which the resources available to health care as a whole can be increased. Some suggestions are ill thought-out. I do not approve of the American system, and under the continental system, Governments must be careful about the costs that they impose on employers and hence on employment, with the prospect of causing unemployment.

We favour an imaginative look at alternative ways of funding health care. We have consistently supported partnership with the private sector. The Liberal Democrats, in the shape of the hon. Member for North Devon, were more than usually prepared to concede that expanding the private sector would ease the pressure on the NHS.

Labour Members argue that if the private sector were allowed to grow, it would compete with the NHS for staff, so we should not even try to contemplate new resources coming into the health service from outside general taxation, because that would increase competition for doctors and nurses. That argument is fatuous and could be used against the expansion of resources in practically every other sector of the economy.

The Prime Minister said on Sunday that of course his Government were in favour of partnership with the private sector. He seems to have lost touch with his own party, as well as with the state of affairs in the NHS. One has only to listen to the present Secretary of State and the previous one, and hear of experiences of attempts to develop further partnership with the private sector, to know that the Labour party is still marked by deep and bitter hostility to the idea that we should source health care other than from the national health service, financed by general taxation.

[Mr. Clarke]

Every other developed country in the world has found that a sterile approach. At a time when the Labour party has got into its first health service crisis, does not know why and has no policy for getting out of it—apart from a few slogans—it should be more receptive to the original and constructive propositions being put forward by the Opposition.

6.2 pm

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): It always gives me great pleasure to take part in health debates: I am one of the few Members who still has personal contact with the NHS, as I still do some medical surgeries in general practice.

We have heard some extraordinary statements today. The one from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) takes the biscuit. He tried to explain that he phased in the pay awards when he was Secretary of State because the health authorities could not afford to pay them. Of course they could not—the previous Government did not give them the money. Had the Government given health authorities the 6.8 per cent. average that we have given, they would have been able to afford decent pay awards for decent staff.

Mr. Brady *rose—*

Dr. Stoate: I shall give way in a moment.

To cool the temper of the debate, I shall try to establish whether there is a genuine crisis in the NHS. I shall do so by reference to my own experience. As the House knows, I am a general practitioner. This morning I contacted my local health trust to find out what was happening. It is indeed under severe strain, among other reasons because it is 92 nurses—about 13 per cent. of the nurse complement—short.

Why are health trusts short of nurses? Because they cannot get trained nurses. Why can they not get trained nurses? Because there are not enough trained nurses in the health service. They are doing their best to put that right, as are the Government, but it is nonsense to suppose that we can produce trained nurses out of a hat.

The idea that complementing the health service by using the private sector would solve the problem is even greater nonsense. The same number of trained nurses would be split between two hospitals—the national health hospital, which would be struggling to keep them, and the private hospital, which would be struggling to poach them. It is fairly obvious that there would be winners and losers, but we cannot stretch the number of nurses, unless we want them to do double shifts and work 16 hours a day.

Mrs. Gillan *rose—*

Dr. Stoate: I shall give way later, but I want to make progress first.

It is impossible to get more out of our dedicated staff. That applies not just to nurses, but to professions allied to medicine, including technicians, and of course doctors. If doctors are doing coronary artery bypass grafts down the road at the private hospital, they are not doing them in the NHS hospital. The idea that twice as many coronary artery bypass grafts could be done if the private ward down the road were opened does not accord with the facts, because the same surgeons work in both the private sector and the NHS.

When I refer patients for surgery, they often ask me whether they can go privately. The answer is yes, they can go privately, but they will see the same consultant and get the same treatment. And guess what? If they get the treatment privately, the consultant whom they see will not be in the NHS hospital. We cannot have it both ways. The idea of expanding the private sector as some miraculous panacea will not do the business.

We heard tell of Lord Winston's comments. Lord Winston is an honourable and decent physician, and he has a point of view, but I cannot agree with it. Consultants are feeling frustrated and let down. As has been pointed out, the reason is that the Government's health reforms, putting primary care in the driving seat, threaten some interest groups. The reforms threaten the monopolies of certain physicians and specialists, who are seeing some of their power put back into primary care, where doctors, nurses, social service staff and others are making decisions on what constitutes the best health care for their area, in conjunction with health improvement programmes, the Commission for Health Improvement and the work of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. All that will improve health care, but may well damage some personal empires and private interests in the health service. I understand that view, although I disagree with it, but to sensationalise the position is quite wrong.

We also heard it said that we need to increase health resources to the European average. That is certainly a target, but we must be careful to compare like with like. In the UK, NHS spending and private health spending together represent about 6.8 per cent. of gross domestic product. The European average is about 8.8 per cent. of GDP—about 2 per cent. more. However, if we analyse those systems, we find that they are much more bureaucratic than ours.

In the 1960s and 1970s the NHS used to spend 3 to 4 per cent. of its total budget on administration and bureaucracy. The Conservatives managed to increase that to 6 per cent. by introducing their market reforms, which increased administration costs, if not clinical costs. In most European systems, the administration costs are far higher—10 per cent. in some cases. In America, administration costs are even higher, and can reach 12 or 15 per cent. If that money is stripped out, the European average of 8.8 per cent. of GDP is closer to 7.8 per cent, which is not so very far above our 6.8 per cent.

I am not arguing that the NHS has enough money. No hon. Member believes that—it clearly does not have enough money. Everyone in the House believes that we need to spend more. There is no argument about that. The question is how we do it.

I listened closely to suggestions from the Opposition about how we could increase the contribution of the private sector. Let us assume that there are enough doctors and nurses, and concentrate on funding. Various alternatives have been proposed, and it is unfair for the Opposition to claim that the Government have not thought them through. The Government have considered them carefully.

The alternatives are compulsory insurance or voluntary insurance. Both have costs. Compulsory insurance is merely a stealth tax. If people are told that they must have private insurance, that is the same as taxation. Where is the advantage in that? We might as well pay for the service out of general taxation. If people are urged to have voluntary insurance, something different will happen. People will say, "If I'm going to pay voluntarily for health insurance, I want something more in return than the bloke down the road, who doesn't have it."

That will create a huge split in the service and a massive two-tier system. I do not believe that the British people's sense of fair play would allow that. There are far greater problems. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, the people who need health insurance—those with chronic illnesses and pre-existing conditions—will not get health insurance.

I should like to see the health insurance company that would take on someone with chronic diabetes, renal failure and eye problems. It would be crazy if it did, and I am sure that actuarial advisers would say that that was a bad bet, in the same way as insurance companies will not take on a young driver with four convictions for drunk driving. They do not want to know such people, and they will not want to know people with chronic health problems. If, however, private health insurance companies were forced to take those people on, it would merely force up the premiums for everyone else, and we would be back where we started. People will not want to pay hugely inflated premiums. Private health insurance simply does not cut the mustard. It is not fair for Conservative Members to claim that we have not thought the matter through. We have considered it for many years.

I want to comment on the suggestion that the health service has deteriorated rapidly since the Labour party took office. When I qualified in medicine 20 years ago, our health service was the envy of the world. Nobody challenged that slogan. Twenty years on, however, we are led to believe that we have the worst system in Europe—a health service that is even worse than Poland's. For 18 of those 20 years, the national health service was in the hands of the Tory party; it has been in the hands of the Labour party for only two years or so. That sets alarm bells ringing and makes people wonder what happened. Could it be that the previous Government were not especially interested in preserving the health service? Perhaps they liked the idea of the slow decline of the NHS into a second-rate service; perhaps it served their purpose. When my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) read out *The Sunday Times* article, which outlined the wishes of the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) for the NHS, the matter began to become clear. Perhaps the hon. Member for Woodspring does not want the NHS to be the primary provider in the new century.

I want to consider the flu epidemic. I shall not speak for too long because other hon. Members want to contribute, but most of the media interest has sprung from the so-called flu epidemic. Frankly, I am not sure whether there is a flu epidemic—and I do not even care, because the answer depends on the way in which one measures an epidemic. A traditional measurement is 400 sufferers per 10,000 visiting a general practitioner in one week. However, nowadays, more options are open to those who suffer from flu. They can visit their pharmacist, phone NHS Direct, go to casualty, speak to a neighbour or take home remedies. Many people are far better informed and do not go to their GP. However, the people who visit their doctor with flu are more ill than in previous years. There are far more cases of genuine flu rather than the flu-like symptoms of previous years. Patients are more ill, need far more treatment and take longer to get over the illness. Some people have taken three or four weeks to recover.

This morning, I saw a lady who was very ill through flu complications. In previous years, I would have sent her to hospital. However, the Government have made a real advance: for the first time, I had an option. I could tell that lady that she did not need to go to hospital because we could manage her condition at home with proper nursing, physiotherapy, and through involving social services. For the first winter I can remember, we can manage that patient at home on an acute basis. The NHS is well prepared for the crisis. I turned up and said what needed to be done. In a few minutes, we took action, the services were provided and the lady could be looked after at home, where she wanted to be. The NHS is thus more modern and better prepared than some hon. Members claim.

I want to consider flu injections. Much research shows that flu injections work, although they are not perfect. However, there are two provisos. The injections need to be targeted at vulnerable groups and we need to increase the herd immunity of the population. I hate to refer to hon. Members as a herd, but the description fits the concept of immunity. Those needs mean vaccinating more widely. The Government should consider carefully widening the net for flu jabs in an epidemic year. That means targeting not only all those who are at risk but their carers. I suggest targeting those who are over 65 rather than over 75, and injecting crucial care workers and others who perform an essential service in society. If a carer is sick with flu, it is a tragedy not only for the carer but the person who is cared for. The Government should consider widening the availability of flu immunisation to cover far more people. We can thus spare the NHS significant strain. If it is true that the NHS is under strain as a result of the flu bug, it is also true that much of the problem would disappear if it was controlled.

The NHS ain't broke, but it needs fixing. It comprises a dedicated group of staff: doctors, nurses, staff in the professions allied to medicine, managers and others do a splendid job in difficult circumstances. We should pay tribute to them because they keep the NHS going. Clearly, we must do something to provide more resources for the NHS. The Government are honest and open in admitting that we need more money and in holding a debate on the source of the funding. For all the reasons that I and other hon. Members have given, privatising more of the health service or increasing private insurance will not provide what we want. We need a modern health service for this century. Privatisation and private health insurance are not the answer; we require a better-funded public health service. I will leave the calculations to the Chancellor and his colleagues because that is their field, but I call for greater funding in future.

If Conservative Members want to reform a bankrupt and outdated institution, they need look no further than their party. I wonder whether the private sector would be interested in buying it from them.

6.16 pm

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): I want to talk about money and pick up on the excellent speech that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) made. I also want to show that the way in which we fund the health service is largely an historical accident, and not replicated in any other country in the world.

The source of money in any society is its citizenry. However a service is funded—through insurance or taxes—the people of a country are the only source of money. However, it is easier to raise money for a purpose such as the national health service if the funds available are numerous and varied. If there are several pots from which to draw money, the strain is far less than when the entire burden is placed on one source: in the case of the NHS, taxation.

Mr. Casale: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Portillo: I shall not give way at all.

The method of funding the NHS in this country came about in an arbitrary manner. Beveridge, who produced his report in 1942, tackled the NHS only briefly. None the less, he commented that

"previous contribution—

by which he meant previous insurance contribution—

"is the ideal, better even than free service supported by the taxpayer."

Bevan devised the idea that the service should be funded only by the taxpayer. In a recent history of the NHS by Geoffrey Rivett, he stated that

"few other countries, outside the Eastern bloc, followed the . . . route"

that Britain took. However, even Nye Bevan recognised that the NHS could survive only if it leant on the private sector. He realised that he could not afford to pay consultants to work in the NHS for the money that was necessary to engage their services. He permitted them to work privately and allowed pay-beds in NHS hospitals. He said:

"I stuffed their mouths with gold."

In other words, he bought off consultants. Labour Members know that that is true. For some Labour Members, especially the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), to talk of the private sector as though it were evil or inimical to the NHS is not only stupid but unhistorical. The NHS has changed little, and continues to depend fundamentally on a cross-subsidy from private patients, which enables it to have consultants' services at cut prices.

Bevan invented the principle that the health service should be funded almost exclusively by taxpayers. As Labour Members know, he and the rest of the Labour Cabinet fell out about that because even the Labour Cabinet that introduced the NHS favoured prescription charges and charges for spectacles. Many supported charging for hospital stays. Even the Labour Government who introduced the NHS believed that it could not survive on taxpayers' funding alone.

When Nye Bevan resigned, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn)—who was a witness to all those events and is in the Chamber now, I think because I told him that I would be quoting him—said, most interestingly:

"On this question of 'principle' of a free health service, it is nonsense. There are many national scandals it would be costly to correct. This is not a matter of principle, but to the contrary it is a practical matter. There is only one test we can apply and it is an overall one: 'with what we have and can get by way of revenue, how can we lay it to the best advantage of those who need it most?'"

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): The right hon. Gentleman said that he would quote from the diary. It was from this seat that I heard Aneurin make his resignation speech. If the right hon. Gentleman reads a little further, he will see that I was in favour of increasing income tax to finance the service. Perhaps he will do me the justice of quoting what I wrote 49 years ago.

Mr. Portillo: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, and my purpose in warning him that I would quote him was intended to enable him to be here if he wanted. His practical approach of all those years ago contrasts sharply with the dogmatic approach of his party's Front Benchers in today's debate. The irony is that Bevan—who resigned in 1950 and was regarded as an outcast, at least by the Labour Cabinet and even by much of the Labour party—subsequently became a hero, and the idea that the health service had to be funded from taxpayers' money alone was raised to the status of a dogma. That dogma, I am afraid, has dogged the debate ever since.

In 1949, the health service absorbed 3.5 per cent. of gross domestic product. Today, that figure is still under 6 per cent. Over 50 years, there has been a minimal increase in the percentage of GDP dedicated to the health service as people—*[Interruption.]* I do not know what the hon. Member for Liverpool, Garston (Maria Eagle) is crying about. As every Member of the House knows, this country contrasts sharply with most others where health services have not been funded exclusively by taxpayers. Let me cite figures that appeared in *The Times* yesterday: Britain spends £889 per head of population; France, £1,433; and Germany, £1,634. We have heard that the United States spends twice the proportion of GDP that we do, but it may astound Labour Members to know that 43 per cent. of its health spending was spent by the public sector in 1993 and it is likely that that figure has increased substantially. That means that the United States public health sector spends more per head of population than the British Government. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) shakes his head, but it is so. Getting on for 50 per cent. of health spending in the United States is spent by the Government. If that is divided by the population, the figure is more than we ourselves spend.

I want to get on to the point about diversity of sources. In the Netherlands, 68 per cent. of health spending comes from social health insurance; 14 per cent. from private insurance; and only 10 per cent. from taxes. The insularity of the Labour party shocks me, as does the idea that a country that is only a few miles away has a system that must self-evidently be rotten or imperfect. The Secretary of State said that he did not want to look at Germany because things did not work there. That must be news to the Germans, but, for the record, about 14 per cent. of health spending in Germany comes from the Government. Here is the appalling fact for us all to face: not only is the

NHS not regarded as the best health service in the world, but we now have the most inequitable system in the world. I do not know of many countries where having money makes as much difference as it does in this country to the treatment received. We know that a person with money can get an operation immediately, and that a person who does not may have to wait several years.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Eighteen years.

Mr. Portillo *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but may I say to the hon. Lady that the silence of parliamentary private secretaries is a wondrous thing?

Mr. Portillo: Given that this country has what appears, at least on paper, to be the most socialist of all health services that I can think of—as Geoffrey Rivett would say, at least outside the old eastern bloc—it is a national disgrace that this is the country where having money makes the biggest difference to whether a person receives timely health treatment.

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Portillo: No, I am about to end my speech.

There is an extraordinary paradox: the Prime Minister says that he wants to modernise Britain, but on the health service he is completely paralysed and unable to look outside the blinkers of the way in which we have done things for 50 years. The right hon. Gentleman regards himself as outward looking and internationalist and wants to be at the heart of Europe, but apparently cannot see through the fog of the channel to look at how things are done differently in different places. It is extraordinary to see such a Prime Minister so dug in and so dogmatically wedded to everything that we have done in the past and to the way in which we have done it. There is no other part of the heritage of the Labour Government of the 1940s to which the Prime Minister is wedded in such a way. Exclusively, apparently, the health service has to remain frozen and preserved in aspic.

The Prime Minister's comments have been disappointing and unworthy. The slogan that has been developed—"the only alternative to modernising is privatising"—is downright dishonest, and many of my right hon. and hon. Friends were deeply depressed that the new Secretary of State was content to sloganise and wanted to make the NHS an election issue, apparently refusing to address the serious point. My conclusion is that Nye Bevan may indeed have done a great service to this country by freeing its people from fear of medical bills, but that, by raising to the status of dogma the financing of the national health service by the taxpayer, he has frozen in fear, in perpetuity, the politicians who ought to be addressing this serious issue.

6.27 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): I have a couple of minutes to make my points, in particular about staff. I have been astonished by some of the comments of Conservative Members. There were amazing understatements, such as that from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who said, "I believe that we did not leave the reforms of the health service quite at the point at which we would have liked." The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said that the health service is preserved in aspic, as though the only issue relating to modernisation is the way that it is funded. Was he entirely satisfied with the state of the NHS when he lost his job in 1997? I suspect not, if what he said today is true.

It is dishonest of the Opposition not to say that the so-called reforms that they put in place have caused these difficulties because they have. There is no question about that. We have gone down a path that has caused the greatest difficulty for our staff in the NHS and the Labour Government are making sure that we get back on the straight and narrow, get people back into the health service and properly respond to their needs, particularly in cash. However, that is not the only issue. It is right and proper to reward nurses, but no one could do the job just for the money.

Not one Conservative Member talked about the safety issues facing the NHS. If people are our most precious commodity, as they are in the NHS, we must respect them and understand that they want to work in an NHS that is safe and does the job that they as professionals expect it to do. It is important that we respond properly to their needs. For example, in the south-east, the availability of affordable housing is an issue and we have to make sure that people can work in places where it is extremely difficult to recruit. The NHS becomes unsafe because we cannot get people to work in it.

We talk about beds, beds, beds and say that there are not enough in the NHS, but that is not the issue. One can go to Ikea and get as many beds as one wants. This is about the people who are working to ensure that the patients in the beds are safe, and are being cared for according to the standards that we all expect.

The modernising agenda is there. The Labour party is responding to the needs. We, not the Conservative party, are listening to people, and that is why we will get it right.

6.30 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I have listened carefully to all that has been said, some of which has been very interesting. The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox) that the growth of the private sector would complement the national health service. I welcome that uncharacteristic display of openness from a Liberal Democrat.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), who is not present, is at least consistent, and I would not expect him to move an inch. I disagree with him entirely, but I respect his consistency: he is one of the few Labour Members who have stuck to a position that they have maintained for many years. He did, however, manage to ignore the experience of the rest of Europe and, indeed, the rest of the world.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) helpfully drew attention to the sterility of much of the political debate about the NHS. He referred to longer-term trends extending over periods exceeding any Government's time in office. The conclusions that we must draw from those longer-term trends underline that,

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

notwithstanding the rhetoric, all Governments over the past 20 years or so have spent more on the NHS, and the problems have not gone away. That emphasises the need for serious consideration of strategic approaches to those problems.

The hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) seemed to suggest that doctors were to blame, because they are building and defending their empires. He apparently supports the idea that the Government should tell doctors how to spend their resources. He calls it modernisation; I suspect that most people in the health service would call it meddling. Most telling of all, after his condemnation of the internal market, he gave figures relating to the differing costs of certain procedures in different hospitals. He was right to draw attention to the disparities, but had it not been for the internal market he would not have had the figures.

Mr. Barron: According to the hon. Gentleman, I said that doctors were to blame. In fact, he has answered his own point. The figures that I gave relate to the practices of clinicians in the NHS. I asked why some clinical interventions cost three times as much as others. Surely he accepts that ensuring that our money is used in a resourceful way should be a priority.

Mr. Hammond: It is an important issue, and the hon. Gentleman is entirely right; but without the internal market he would not have the figures that he has been quoting at us, and we could not pursue his argument and, hopefully, make the necessary savings.

In our last health debate, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) warned the Secretary of State that winter crises would inevitably recur unless the fundamental issues were addressed. I remember that very well. My right hon. and learned Friend is eminently qualified to draw attention to the myth continually promoted by the Government that a re-elected Conservative Administration would have stuck to the draft spending plans. Everyone knows that we had annual spending rounds, and spending on the NHS would—as it always had—have increased year on year. By pretending that they would follow the Conservative spending plans, the Government starved the NHS for the first two years; now they wonder why the patient is not responding to force feeding.

My right hon. and learned Friend spoke of the discredited £21 billion slogan. As he said, it has now been replaced by a new slogan referring to a "five years ahead" target to match a European spending average that has not been defined for us. It is not even clear to me that that constitutes a pledge. I hope that the Minister can tell us whether the Prime Minister gave a clear commitment on Sunday.

The hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate), who often speaks on these matters, said that the NHS wasn't broke, but did need fixing. He seemed to miss an important point about additional resources. He said that expanding private spending would simply denude the NHS of resources. Let me tell him that, whether financial resources come from the private sector or the public sector, they will contribute exactly the same to the pot, and the problem will be exactly the same: how to turn financial resources into real resources. The Secretary of State may say that that problem can be solved by injecting more public money, but it can equally be solved by finding other financial resources.

Dr. Stoate: It is generous of the hon. Gentleman to give way to me in his winding-up speech. In fact, I was referring to NHS staff. There are not enough doctors, not enough nurses and not enough members of professions allied to medicine. Until we have trained more people—as the Government are doing—reapportioning the same number of staff between the private and public sectors will not improve the situation.

Mr. Hammond: What the hon. Gentleman said was that more private spending would denude the NHS of resources. More needs to be spent on health care, but the problem of translating financial resources into real resources—doctors and nurses—will be the same whether the money comes through additional private spending, a mixed model or more state expenditure.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) drew our attention to the important fact that it is largely through historical accident that our national health service is funded as it is. He posed a good question: why is it, outside the eastern bloc, a unique model for the delivery of health care? If it had so much to recommend it, why did not other countries in western Europe copy it when rebuilding their economies in the 1950s and 1960s? He also drew attention to the insularity of the Labour party. The party that does not want to be isolated in Europe has refused to learn anything from the lessons of all our European neighbours over 30 or 40 years.

I am delighted that the Under-Secretary of State for Wales is to wind up the debate, but I find it odd that, with four junior health Ministers in the House, it was not possible to find one who was willing and able to do so.

We have heard from Labour Members—not least the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt)—a catalogue of complacency, in the face of the worst short-term crisis that the NHS has faced in living memory and against a backdrop of growing discontent with the state of our health system overall. The Government stand exposed as complacent, ill-prepared, shifty and manipulative when under pressure, and simply not credible when attempting to formulate a policy response to the longer-term strategic questions that face health services, while refusing to abandon any of their dogmatic baggage.

I thought it a telling insight into new Labour's priorities that, at the beginning of last week, with patients dying for want of intensive-care beds, staff working at breaking point and hospitals bursting at the seams, there was, according to the Secretary of State, "not a crisis". But by the end of the week, one doctor speaking his mind and telling the truth about Labour's national health service had become a crisis of such proportions that it required the direct involvement of the Prime Minister.

Labour has no credible policy solution to the problems of the NHS: the Prime Minister's intervention confirmed that. We have no clue about how the Government would deal with the real problems in the long term. Their prescription is "more of the same"—although it is obvious to every qualified observer that, after nearly three years, the new Labour medicine simply is not working.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield commented, in the Secretary of State's whole rambling speech, there was not a single new idea for the resourcing of our national health service.

The Secretary of State said that he had an open mind, but it was abundantly clear during his speech that he has not. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield said, it is unbelievably depressing. The Secretary of State's dogmatic hostility to the private sector was tangible throughout his speech.

Many hon. Members paid tribute to the valiant efforts of the dedicated staff—just about the only thing holding the health service together. I associate myself with those remarks, but the fact is that, despite those efforts, the NHS is not providing a basic acceptable level of service to all. The Prime Minister has acknowledged as much, snatching the rug as he did so from under the Secretary of State, who just a few days earlier had denied that that was the case.

As it is currently managed and run, the NHS clearly cannot cope when faced with a sudden surge in demand. People living in an advanced, affluent democracy—the world's fifth largest economy—at the outset of the 21st century should not have to ask themselves, "If I fall sick, will there be a hospital bed available for me?" or, "If I need an intensive care bed, how many hundreds of miles will I have to be transported to get it?"

Our neighbours in France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands take such a service for granted. It is increasingly clear that the British public are no longer willing to be denied the levels of health care that their neighbours enjoy simply because of the Government's dogmatic political ideology.

The current crisis in the NHS is a catalyst that demands a triple response. First, we need an immediate short-term response from the Government. On that count, they have clearly failed. They failed to give a clear undertaking to hospitals that they could devote resources to medical priorities without risking penalisation under the Government's waiting list scheme. They have failed to take the lead in encouraging NHS hospitals to use the private sector where that is sensible. Instead, they have ducked and weaved, relying on spin, rather than looking for real solutions.

The Government tried to exaggerate the status of the flu epidemic outbreak. They then misled us over the number of intensive care beds that had been created and suppressed the report of the inquiry into NHS beds, which will show that, despite their rhetoric, bed numbers have fallen under Labour.

Secondly, in the medium term, we need an end to the system of initiatives that is doing so much to damage the NHS, particularly the Government's waiting list pledge, which has grotesquely distorted clinical priorities throughout the service in favour of Labour's political priorities. Since they came to office, they have doubled the number of in-patients waiting more than 13 weeks and doubled the number of people waiting for an out-patient consultation. We need an end to that distorting system immediately.

Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, the crisis shows the need for a longer-term, more measured response to the underlying problems of the NHS: not a panic reaction such as the one that has occurred in the past couple of days, with wild half promises and vague commitments, but a measured, serious review of the options for future delivery of health care.

We have invited the Government to join in such a review, starting without any ideological baggage and looking at all the options with the open mind that the Secretary of State claimed he had. It has been made abundantly clear from the things that he has said that he rejects that opportunity to take the NHS off the political battlefield and to deal with it rationally.

So far, the Government's only response to serious debate on the future of the health service is to level the rather pathetic charge that anyone who dares to question the sustainability of the present model—which is now almost all serious commentators—wants to privatise the NHS. That seems to be the only argument that the Government can deploy in defence of the status quo. They do not deploy reasoned arguments, call for open discussion of the options, or review experience elsewhere. It is simply a knee-jerk reaction. That strikes me as the position of a Government who are not confident of their case, but have a bunker-style mentality, are increasingly isolated at home on the issue and are in a minority of one, even among their socialist colleagues in Europe.

The Conservative position could not be clearer. The Leader of the Opposition has made it clear, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring again today. We are committed absolutely to the NHS, free at the point of delivery. We are committed to increases year on year in real terms in NHS funding under the next Conservative Government. However, we recognise that, even with that commitment to tax-funded NHS spending, it will not be enough in the face of the explosion in medical technology and the imminent genetics revolution. All serious commentators now agree that what is needed is strategic and innovative thinking about the NHS. We have seen that there is no appetite on the Government Benches for such a debate.

The irresistible conclusion for anyone with an open mind on the subject is that a great part of the additional spending that we will have to deploy to deliver the health services that the people of this country demand and deserve in the 21st century will have to come from sources other than general taxation. That is not to supplant the NHS, but to supplement it. It is to ensure sustainable growth in the overall resources that are available for health care.

As a result of this debate, the Government need to recognise, if nothing else, that it is not the ideological purity of the NHS that matters to the people of Britain, but the practical reality of effective health care that is free at the point of delivery and there for them when they need it—as, tragically, it was not for Mavis Skeet and many others.

6.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): We have had an interesting debate, although it has been somewhat curtailed because of the time available, on the important subject of the NHS. To answer the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) immediately, I am here as the Under-Secretary of State for Wales because we are a United Kingdom Parliament. There are Labour Members who are interested in Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland health

[Mr. David Hanson]

matters and issues in a UK context. I recognise that the Conservative party does not have seats in any of those places, but it is important for us to look at the health service in the context of the UK. As hon. Members can see, the amendment has been tabled in the names of my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Northern Ireland and for Wales, whereas the Conservative party motion refers to the UK as a whole.

Some central themes have been raised: change, funding, modernisation and reform. However, there has been a marked divergence between the approach of the Conservative Opposition and that of Labour Members. Interestingly, the three Members who spoke from the Conservative Back Benches were the right hon. Members for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) and for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) and the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). They were all Cabinet Ministers in the Conservative Government, who were in office for 18 years and caused many of the problems that we face today.

The Conservative Opposition have suggested that there is under-funding in the NHS. They have made some imaginative suggestions about increased involvement of the private health sector in funding the NHS. Alternative ways have been suggested to allow the private sector to take over some of the responsibilities that are funded by taxation. All those ideas are contrary to the spirit of what the Government believe in, to which Labour Members have referred. It is interesting that, while serving their party in government for 18 years, those three Conservative Back Benchers supported the NHS by reducing its funding. They now come forward—

Sir Raymond Whitney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hanson: In a moment.

Those Conservative Members reduced NHS funding in overall terms—

Sir Raymond Whitney *rose—*

Mr. Hanson: I will give way in a moment.

Those Members reduced funding in overall terms— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. We cannot have such behaviour. The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) should not shout across the Chamber.

Mr. Hanson: In that time, those Conservative Members reduced the NHS's real funding and caused difficulties, but they now suggest using the private health sector as an option for funding.

Sir Raymond Whitney: Will the hon. Gentleman retract the misinformation that he has just given the House? The figures show that, in the 18 years of Conservative Government, real-terms spending on the health service increased by 75 per cent.

Mr. Hanson: This Government will be providing additional resources to the national health service, over and above what the Conservative Government provided. As a constituency Member of Parliament, my experience has been—[HON. MEMBERS: "Withdraw."]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no point in hon. Members shouting withdraw. The Minister is in order. Had he been out of order, I would have been the first to say so.

Mr. Hanson: My experience as a constituency Member of Parliament is that, when the previous Government were in office, the number of beds in my constituency and overall NHS real-terms funding were reduced.

In today's debate, my hon. Friends the Members for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) and for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) have offered real alternatives in ensuring modernisation, commitment and long-term funding of the NHS and in tackling the consequences of the Tory record on the national health service. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford expressed strong views on illness prevention, a primary issue that will have to be addressed if we are to ensure that the NHS is strongly supported.

In this debate, there was, as ever, disagreement among Liberal Democrat Members. The hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey) certainly welcomed the Government's plans to achieve additional expenditure on health services, so that it matches the similar expenditure of our European partners. However, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), who has left the Chamber, did not particularly support his comments, or those of Conservative Members, on private-sector involvement.

We have had an interesting debate, in which hon. Members have raised various issues, but the themes developed by Conservative Members—on the private health sector and on underfunding—have not chimed with it.

I am proud to be a member of a Labour Government—such as the one who founded the national health service. The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea mentioned Bevan's founding of the health service, but not the fact that Conservative Members voted 51 times against its founding. I am proud to be a member of a Government who are committed to modernising the health service and to looking forward.

There is great pressure on the national health service, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and others recognise that pressure. However, we should remember that, over Christmas, hundreds of people across Wales, Scotland and England received emergency care and were admitted to hospital, and that hundreds of thousands of people received other support and help from the NHS.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The hon. Gentleman relies on his own constituency experience to deny the 75 per cent. real funding increase provided by the Conservative Government. My constituency experience includes a 75-year-old lady who, on Christmas eve, was turned away from the Redhill hospital and sent to find an intensive care bed in Great Yarmouth. What does the Minister tell her and her family about the treatment that she received?

Mr. Hanson: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, there have been problems—no one denies that.

At the start of 2000, there were 190 cases of flu per 100,000 population in Wales, whereas four weeks previously only three people per 100,000 had flu. It was a major increase in a short time. We have to recognise that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford said, people are now suffering from flu for longer—on average, 10 to 12 days rather than four to five days—and that more older people are suffering from it.

Certainly in Wales, and probably also in England, the pressures are the greatest in 25 years—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] The Government have provided extra resources in England and Wales—*[Interruption.]* Pressures on health services in my part of Wales are certainly the greatest that they have been for 25 years, due largely to the number of people who have had flu—*[Interruption.]* We need to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow the situation to continue. The Minister is entitled to a hearing.

Mr. Hanson: Pressures on the health service have increased substantially because of the flu, but those pressures are being dealt with. We have provided additional resources to deal with winter pressures and undertaken severe long-term planning to deal with them.

Today's debate gives us an opportunity to focus on the future, not simply on the current winter crisis. Since the general election, the Government have increased real-terms spending on the health service.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hanson: I shall give way in a moment.

Since the general election, an additional £1.9 billion has been pledged in England and, in the next three years, another £18 billion of extra expenditure will be provided. In those two years, in my part of Wales £291 million over and above the resources planned by the Conservative Government has been provided, and £1.3 billion of expenditure is pledged for the next three years. It is about the need to ensure long-term planning, modernisation, change and funding—which is the exact point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley.

Mr. Wilshire: If there is so much extra money sloshing around, why has my health authority been ordered to cut £20 million of its spending in the next three years?

Mr. Hanson: As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health said, there have been huge deficits in some health authorities.

We should consider the Tory record. Under the previous Government—and the stewardship of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), who was Secretary of State for Wales—Wales lost 1,200 hospital beds, inpatient waiting lists increased by 5,800, and 300 nurses, midwives and home visitors were lost.

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hanson: No; time is pressing. [HON. MEMBERS: "Give way."] The hon. Gentleman overran his time.

We should focus on the Labour initiatives that the Government have taken in Wales and elsewhere. To date, NHS Direct has received almost 1 million calls. In Wales, NHS Direct has received—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Hammond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has said that he will not give way.

Mr. Hanson: The national health service, under the stewardship of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, has provided an additional £80 million for cancer services and an additional £3.5 million in Wales. The funding is part of meeting the target—in which the Prime Minister is directly interested—of saving 100,000 lives.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Gillan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hanson: No.

Additional resources have been provided to assist nurse recruitment in Wales. Extra nurse posts are available in Wales and elsewhere. The Government have spent additional sums on walk-in centres, with 20 pilot centres established in the current year in England. Since the general election, the capital programme has increased dramatically.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mrs. Gillan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is clear that the Minister will not give way. The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) should not remain on her feet, but should take the hint that he is not giving way.

Mr. Hanson: We have ensured the largest capital programme in the history of the national health service, with £8 billion of additional expenditure in the United Kingdom.

We are also making a commitment to modernise and invest for the future. The Labour commitment is for improved funding. As the Prime Minister said, we shall invest an average funding increase to ensure that, as a percentage of gross domestic product, the United Kingdom provides the same funding levels as those provided by our European partners. We shall ensure that, over five years, there is a 5 per cent. real-terms funding growth in the national health service to ensure that we bring ourselves up to the European average.

The Government are about modernisation and aiming for higher standards. We are also about ensuring that we provide decent levels of care for our people. Conservative Members offer privatisation, but private health insurance is not a solution to the national health service's funding problems. They argue that people should insure themselves privately, but the people who might need private health insurance under the Conservatives are the ones whom the private health insurers will not touch.

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[Mr. Hanson]

We are committed to funding and modernising the national health service and to ensuring real improvements over the next five years under this Government and beyond.

If people want privatisation, they should follow the route of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea, who said that it was just a historical fact that the national health service was founded under Labour. He said that, under the Conservatives, private health insurance would become the norm. We reject that approach. We stand for extra funding for the national health service.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 183, Noes 328.

Division No. 30] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*

Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Graham, Thomas
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments), and agreed to.*

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House applauds the dedication and commitment of National Health Service staff for their tireless efforts at all times and in particular during the millennium holiday period and the current severe outbreak of flu; welcomes the Government's acceptance of the recommendations of the National Health Service Pay Review bodies in full and without staging for the second year, in start contrast to the practice of the previous administration; notes that, between 20th December and last weekend, there were 350,000 999 calls, over 800,000 attendances at Accident and Emergency departments and there have been over 250,000 emergency admissions; recognises the vital role in meeting these pressures played by the unprecedented level of planning for the winter, covering health and social services and the extension of NHS Direct to two-thirds of England; welcomes the measures already taken by this Government to increase the capacity of the National Health Service, including increased provision of critical care beds, the modernisation of Accident and Emergency departments, the biggest ever National Health Service hospital building programme, the employment of additional doctors and the recruitment of more nurses, the cuts in in-patient waiting lists, the extra investment to modernise cancer, coronary and mental health services and the commitment to increased investment in and modernisation of the National Health Service; and rejects the Opposition's proposals to privatise the National Health Service.

Government Running Costs

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.16 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of the increase in running costs of central Government and rising waste in public expenditure; regrets that this means resources are not reaching front-line public services; regrets that the Government seeks to deflect criticism of their failure to deliver improvements in public services onto public servants; notes the doubling in the number of paid political advisers; and deplores the Government's reliance on spin-doctoring and bureaucracy in place of support for public services.

This debate, and the one that preceded it, are two sides of the same coin. Nearly 1,000 days into this Labour Government, the public's experience of the health service, schools, transport and crime tells them that Labour is failing to live up to its election promises. They know that Labour is putting up taxes by stealth—£40 billion of extra taxes—and they are told that billions are going into health and education. Yet they know also that money is not reaching front-line services.

In my constituency, Addenbrookes hospital—a world-class hospital—is budgeting this year for a £2.5 million deficit, its first-ever such deficit. In recent weeks, it has on four occasions had to transfer intensive care patients elsewhere—something it has had to do only once before.

Vital as it is to increase the resources for health and other key public services, the responsibility that goes with it, placed upon Government, is to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent effectively. The public want to know where the money is going.

One key part of the answer is that billions are going to meet the costs of Labour's failure to reform and reduce welfare spending. The Prime Minister said:

"I vow that we will have reduced the proportion—

of national income—

"we spend on welfare bills of social failure."

Yet the increase in social security spending will be more than £30 billion by the end of the Parliament. That, however, is not the whole story.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The hon. Gentleman referred to the "reform" of welfare spending. Is he acknowledging, therefore, that welfare spending needed reforming?

Mr. Lansley: Welfare spending needs to get away from the Government's approach of spending more while failing to reduce welfare budgets, and to get away from the means-testing proposals. We need a genuine reform of welfare spending that will enable more resources to be delivered to front-line public services. That is what the public are looking for.

However, as I said, that is not the whole story. Where else is the money going? It is going into the cost of running central Government itself. Whitehall saw Labour coming, and big government is back. The figures are startling. The Conservatives cut the number of civil servants by nearly a third. Since the election, that reduction has virtually stopped.

The last Conservative Government introduced management information systems, tough running cost limits and measures to relate activity and outputs to resources and their deployment. By comparison, under Labour, we have the much vaunted public service agreements, which are geared less to the value for money of spending and more to Treasury micro-management of public services according to Labour's political objectives—even extending to setting the priorities of local government.

The last Conservative Government had a grip on the cost of administering central Government itself. That is something that the public have a right to expect. At the last election, I met plenty of voters who wanted to see more resources for health, education and the police. However, I met none who wanted to see the Government spend more on administration.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): If the Conservative Government had a grip on government costs, could the hon. Gentleman explain why, in the last two years of that Government, the national debt doubled?

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman knows that that Conservative Administration were rapidly reducing Government debt—*[Interruption.]* In the last two years—that is what the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) is asking. In the last five years of that Conservative Administration, we saw a 10 per cent. reduction in real terms in Government running costs. In the five years before the 1997-98 financial year, that was the record of the Conservative Administration.

What has happened under Labour, by contrast with that 10 per cent. real terms reduction? The last published spending plans before May 1997 said that, compared with 1997–98, the running costs of Departments would be reduced by £223 million in the subsequent year and, in 1999–2000, would be £114 million lower than the base year. The Government's latest figures show that the cost of administration of Departments last year was £867 million higher than the preceding year and this year will be £1,104 million higher than the base year. Compared with previous plans, therefore, Labour has not delivered the planned savings, and it has also lost its grip and let spending on running the Government rise sharply.

The result is that in the space of two years £2,300 million more has been spent on administration than was set out in the plans this Government inherited. That is an enormous sum that could buy much front-line activity. Given the debate that we have just had, it is instructive to note that the sum is more than half the annual cost of general practitioners in the NHS; it is more than is spent in a year on children's personal social services; and it is one third more than this year's total capital spending in the NHS. I recall that Labour's so-called early pledge to cut waiting lists by 100,000 was to be achieved by cutting administration costs by £100 million, but if Labour has spent £2,300 million more on administration, that is a compelling reason why it is failing to deliver.

Department by Department the story is the same. For the Department of Health, we achieved a £93 million reduction in total running costs for the four years before the election, but that has been followed in the subsequent two years by a £38 million increase. At the Department for Education and Employment, we achieved a £95 million reduction in the three years before the election, which has been followed by a £36 million increase in the past two years. For the Department of Trade and Industry, spending was down by £82 million in the two years before the election but has gone up by £55 million in the two years since.

The cost and waste does not stop at departmental running costs. Scattered through the Government's spending plans are their slush funds, the so-called unallocated provision, which adds up to £173 million. It adds insult to injury for the taxpayer to have to pay more in taxes only for the money to be wasted or squandered on Labour's machinery of spin and disinformation. The public want more doctors and fewer spin doctors, and that is what the Conservative party will offer.

To Labour, facts do not speak for themselves. Indeed, it believes that facts should not speak at all. Interpretation is all, and facts are secondary. Lack of accountability is the easy Labour way out of answering for the Government's lack of policy achievement. They spin their way out of problems, thanks to the growing phalanx of taxpayer-funded political advisers.

In the summer last year, we had the absurdity of Labour's annual report, in which dozens of manifesto pledges were counted as realised because the Government had published some document or announced some future target. For Labour, activity is a substitute for achievement. Its response to criticism is to blame public servants, as we saw last summer. Labour wants to make the civil service, not Ministers, accountable for the results of its policies.

I applaud the Neill committee's vigilance in following up the Government's evident desire to make political compliance the key to career advancement inside the civil service. The Neill committee last week recommended that the performance measurement of permanent heads of Departments

"should be structured to allow for some element of independent validation so as not to undermine political impartiality".

That is right, but as a former civil servant myself, I find it profoundly depressing that the qualities and values of civil servants, who are often highly able and dedicated to public service, are at risk of being undermined by the pressure for political correctness and compliance demanded by Labour Ministers and their paid political advisers.

The growth of direct political interference in the provision of policy advice to Ministers is among the greatest dangers. On that, we can see clearly that big Government means worse Government.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Is the hon. Gentleman apologising for the actions of the Tory Government in the early 1980s, post-Rayner, when political allegiance to monetarism was the key to promotion, not ability? Many people left rather than subscribe to that view.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman was a civil servant himself at that time, as was I. His experience may have been different, but my experience at the Department of Trade and Industry was that there was no such basis for advancement in the civil service. I worked for Lord Tebbit of Chingford, who may have politicised me, but he did not politicise the civil servants with whom he worked.

[Mr. Lansley]

Indeed, many people from that Department will vouch for the fact that he took impartial policy advice and never confused his responsibility as a party politician with his responsibility as a Minister.

The Labour party has virtually doubled the number of special advisers. The pay bill has more than doubled. At 10 Downing street, there are now 25 politically appointed special advisers, but the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), had eight.

The Neill committee has made welcome proposals about the future scrutiny and numbers of advisers. Of immediate concern to us, however, is the malign influence that those advisers are having on Government and the body politic. They are not discreet advisers. They see themselves as extensions of their Ministers. They brief against each other as much as against us. They have briefed against civil servants, who cannot answer in kind. They speak at party meetings. They take key advisory posts, such as chief press spokesman or chief economic adviser, formerly held by permanent civil servants. They have made more than 170 overseas visits. They see themselves as plenipotentiaries for their Ministers and insert themselves into the chain of ministerial decision making, superior to, rather than complementary to, the impartial sources of advice on which Ministers should rely.

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): The hon. Gentleman just said that special advisers have a malign influence on the system. The Neill committee has recently considered the point and it did not come to that conclusion. In fact, the Neill committee heard from the Cabinet Secretary and others that special advisers had a valuable role to play.

Mr. Lansley: I remember the point that the Neill committee made, but that did not stop the committee reviewing the compliance with the existing model contract and codes of conduct for special advisers and concluding that a new statutory code of conduct is required. The committee also recommended a limit on the number of special advisers. It is my view that the extent to which Labour has introduced political advisers and the extent to which they have overstepped their proper role is a malign influence.

Special advisers have a valuable role to play, but they should do so within the code of conduct. Their role should be modest and dedicated to party political advice, not to seeking to influence the role of the civil service. My view differs from that of the Neill committee. I accept that the committee does not endorse my view, but the fact that it examined the way that the Government have acted in the past two years, and felt it necessary to extend its remit, is an indication of widespread concerns that are not confined to the Conservative party.

Dr. Wright: Could the difference be that the Neill committee took evidence for its views?

Mr. Lansley: Much of the evidence was persuasive. My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), the shadow Leader of the House, gave good evidence on those points. It is not for me to anticipate the Neill committee's future judgments, but if there is no change in the way in which special advisers operate within the present Administration, the committee would be right to revisit the issue and take further serious steps to limit their number and their role in Government.

The impact of special advisers on the civil service is evident in the way in which information officers have responded. Some 15 out of 17 of the most senior information officers in the Government have been removed, in one way or another. In place of information, we get disinformation. I talked today to one of those former chief information officers. He said, with understandable feeling, that to wave away the malign influence of unelected unaccountable political advisers was wrong. As he said, special advisers in those numbers, and with that attitude, will ultimately lead to a corruption of the system.

The Prime Minister at least has made no bones about the party political nature of his information system. He described the job of his chief press spokesman as being to attack the Conservative party. No. 10 has now set up the knowledge network—1984-speak for a group that I am told is referred to as the Ministry of Truth in Whitehall—which is to be staffed by Millbank tower émigrés and headed by a Mr. Joe McCrea.

The rules governing special advisers state that advisers must "express comment with moderation". I am sure that that was always Mr. McCrea's approach, and I can tell people unfamiliar with that soul of moderation that he was spin doctor in chief to the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) throughout the period when the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State for Health. Therefore, even as a new set of spin doctors try to spin their way out of the mess that he left behind, the architect of disinformation on health is to be embraced once again at the centre of Government.

The Government appear to have learned nothing. When will they understand that false promises, double and triple counting and layers of gloss placed on unpalatable truths only make matters worse in the long run? I warn the Government that, in opposition, they may have been able to avoid the truth but, in government, truth will out. I fear that they will not heed that warning but will persist in believing that the relationship of perception to reality is a one-way street. They believe that, if they can control perceptions, reality does not matter.

The Government are wrong. Reality influences perception, and it is no part of the civil service task to substitute Labour perceptions for reality. It is symptomatic of the threat that Labour represents to civil service impartiality that a senior official is reported to have said of the knowledge network being established in No. 10:

> "It is highly questionable whether some aspects of the system are justified in policy terms. Much of the information is only useful for political campaigning and there is huge concern that civil servants will be drawn into using it to provide party political information."

We see the result. We have reached the sorry pass that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food can announce an aid package of £530 million, only for us to find—with the help of a Select Committee and others—that it turns out to be worth only £1 million extra to farmers.

Labour remains what it has always been—the party of higher taxes and bigger government. The reality of that is more bureaucracy, and more politicians, reviews,

quangos, tiers of government, incompetence and waste. There is now a mountain of extra government. An extra £2.3 billion has been added to the cost of administering central Government. It costs £35 million to run the Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh Assembly costs an extra £15 million. There are 359 extra paid politicians.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House what price the Conservative party places on democracy? Is he in favour of consulting people, drawing in other views and creating policies based on real-life experience? Does he agree that a mature Government bases policies on real evidence, or does he prefer the politics displayed by previous Administrations? Those arrogant and complacent Governments merely dictated from the centre and were completely out of touch with people.

Mr. Lansley: We believe in the reality of democracy, which is about holding Executives to account as well as about representing people. Labour wants to wield power and aggrandise government, but we want to give power to people by giving local government the power to determine matters according to local circumstances and needs. Real democracy is not about giving power to tiers of regional government, or about making Britain the most governed country in Europe through the addition of more tiers of government. It is about making government and democracy effective.

I said earlier that the Government believe activity can substitute for achievement, and that increasing the size of government automatically makes government more effective. I have news for the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears): more government generally means less effective government.

I noted that there are now 359 extra paid politicians. I invite the hon. Member for Salford to ask people whether they think that this country would benefit from more paid politicians, or fewer. The Government have also set up 500 reviews. The Government appeared to take office on a democratic mandate, but their actions since have amounted only to government by review.

The Government have also established 318 task forces. The Nolan rules were intended to ensure an open system of appointment of those outside government who give Ministers advice. Yet most of the 318 task forces are treated as temporary, whether they are or not. They are therefore considered to be outside the Nolan rules and an extension of ministerial patronage.

The previous Government introduced the system known as the Nolan rules. Those rules were intended to ensure that there existed open and impartial sources of advice inside government, and that those sources included civil servants and people brought in to staff advisory bodies and executive bodies of all kinds. However, the Government have already set out to evade the rules and to extend Ministers' patronage. They call it bringing people into the tent—I suspect that they would not want to say that they were bringing people into the dome.

There is also a layer of regional government, in the form of development agencies, that costs £69 million a year to run. I searched, without success, in departmental annual reports for evidence of a reduction in the running costs of central Government to compensate for the establishment of the regional development agencies.

An extra £70 million is to be spent on Government advertising this year. There has been a series of costly IT and administrative blunders. The Public Accounts Committee reported waste in parts of the benefits system and in the public-partnership for the London Underground. The cost of the national handover plan for the euro is, as yet, undisclosed.

If the British people knew the half of the problem, they would rebel against the forces of big government. It is the Opposition's job to see that they do know the size of the problem and to offer the commonsense alternative—smaller government, with more power for people and their communities.

The alternative also includes free schools, the patients guarantee and the tax guarantee. We would have fewer politicians, and more doctors but fewer spin doctors. We would demonstrate a renewed commitment to reducing the administrative cost of central Government. More money would be available for vital public services as a result. We would respect the impartiality and values of the civil service.

Our alternative system would be accountable to a strengthened Parliament that was more able to hold the Executive to account. Genuinely devolved responsibility to communities and local government would mean that accountable decisions would be made locally.

The contrast is clear. Those who talk of convergence in politics are not looking at this issue. The direction of Labour is to bigger government, diminished accountability and a weaker citizenry. The Conservative way is to go for smaller government that works better, which is more accountable and which strengthens the powers and responsibilities of citizens.

The arrogance of this Government is never more brazen than when they are exploiting the power of government for their own political ends. They spend taxpayers' money on the machinery of government and on their pet schemes as if there were an inexhaustible supply of other people's hard-earned income. At the same time, they manipulate the press and the media to prevent the public from knowing what is really going on, and to undermine the effectiveness of the House or the media in holding the Government to account.

This debate charges the Government with favouring big government, high running costs, waste and excess. The evidence condemns them, and I urge the House to support the motion.

7.39 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office (Marjorie Mowlam): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"notes that, compared to the previous administration, the costs of central Government have not risen in real terms, and have indeed fallen; supports the progress made by this Government in cleaning up politics and rebuilding the bond of trust with the British people, broken through the failures of the previous administration; welcomes the Government's actions to improve democratic accountability; endorses the inclusive approach to policymaking of the Modernising Government agenda, which involves more people from all walks of life; welcomes the improvement in standards in public life; and agrees, with the Sixth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life that 'special advisers have a valuable role to play.'."

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) has painted an extraordinary picture. Few hon. Members would recognise it as an accurate or fair

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account of the way in which the Government have started to reduce costs and improve accountability in political life. It is a sham and a farce to peddle the notion that this Government are less accountable and less open than the previous Administration.

The hon. Gentleman referred in a cavalier fashion to perceptions; I shall deal in reality now, and answer some of the arguments that he has attempted to make.

The hon. Gentleman argued that costs have risen. I have just listened to figures produced by the Opposition that could exist only in a fantasy land—just like last Sunday's claim by the Leader of the Opposition that the total cost of running Whitehall has risen by £1,000 million in the past two years and that he would cut that to fund his health spending plans. That is not the real world. Those figures are ludicrous: they take no account of inflation—of the running costs of wages and of materials that people use in their work every day.

The real figures show that administration costs have fallen in real terms compared with those of the previous Government. We are spending less than the last Government on Whitehall bureaucracy. Spending was higher when the Conservatives were in power, yet they now say that they would make cuts in public services. We all know where those cuts would fall. The Conservatives would scrap the working families tax credit, the new deal and the national minimum wage; they would undermine child benefit and cut help for pensioners. Those are the first real cuts that they would make.

The hon. Gentleman argued that the Conservative party would make a difference in the health service. Would they make as big a difference as we did in the first year, with £21 billion announced for NHS spending? *[Interruption.]* In the first year, we announced a spending figure of £21 billion. I shall go on to give the figures for the second and third years, if Conservative Members will give me a break.

Spending on NHS bureaucracy has been reduced, and spending on front-line patient care has increased. We have done away with the two-tier system and, under the primary care system, patients' voices will be heard. We have started the building that will continue in the second year with the money that was announced in the first year. It will go on 37 new hospitals, the £100 payments towards winter fuel bills, free eye tests and increases in child benefit. Those changes have been made: they, and not the Opposition's perceptions, are the reality.

The hon. Gentleman's second argument is that special advisers are a drain on the public purse. I am sorry that he disagrees, as he made it very clear, with Lord Neill, who said last week in his sixth report that special advisers have a valuable role to play. Sir Richard Wilson, head of the civil service, has said that he does not think that the senior civil service—who number about 3,500 or 3,600—is in danger of being swamped by 70 special advisers; he does not regard what is happening as creeping politicisation.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): When the Prime Minister appointed 53 advisers, which was a substantial increase on the 38 posts that existed when he came to power, he said that although there would be more advisers, the total salary bill would be kept under the same cost umbrella of £1.8 million that he had inherited from the previous Government. Why has the salary bill now reached £4 million?

Marjorie Mowlam: The Prime Minister made no secret of the fact that he wanted special advisers in the Government to help drive the Government's policies forward. I make no apology for the fact that we are governing in a different way from the previous Administration. Given the mess that they got into, I am sure that most people welcome the change.

In answer to the question from the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), the overall costs have remained broadly in line with what the Prime Minister promised. We have made no secret of the numbers and cost of special advisers or of their work. We said that the number and funding of special advisers would be published—something that no previous Government had done. We have done all that.

The fact that we have special advisers guarantees—contrary to what the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire argued—the impartiality of the civil service. Who writes my party conference speeches with me? Do I ask a civil servant? No—I ask a special adviser. That is what they are there for. They protect the civil service, rather than making it political.

Let me reinforce that point by quoting Jonathan Baume of the Association of First Division Civil Servants. He said:

"A good special adviser is well worth having in any Department—it is also fair to say that this Government have used its special advisers in a much more upfront way. A good special adviser is an asset to a Department, both to the Minister and to the civil service."

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): The Minister quotes Jonathan Baume. His predecessor at the Association of First Division Civil Servants now sits on the Labour Benches in the Lords, so I am not sure whether those comments are completely impartial.

The Government have put special advisers in executive control of impartial civil servants. Career civil servants know that they must serve the interests of the Government of the day if they want to get on. That is the new corruption that the Government have introduced through the special adviser system.

Marjorie Mowlam: That is an insult to the civil service. The quote I gave was from the head of the Association of First Division Civil Servants, whose integrity the hon. Gentleman has just questioned. Civil servants continue to be impartial advisers. If they were not—if we did not have special advisers giving us political advice—there would be the potential for politicisation. At the moment, there is not.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): What about Alastair Campbell?

Marjorie Mowlam: Alastair Campbell is not a party spokesperson. It is right that he is not paid out of the party purse. His contract makes it clear that he is employed to speak to the media on the Government's behalf. He expresses not his own views but those of the Prime

Minister, and he avoids personal attacks. [*Laughter.*] Does the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) want to follow that up? Alastair Campbell's role is clear.

Mr. Green: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Will the Minister give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: Not for the moment. The fact that Alastair Campbell's is a political appointment means that civil servants are not being asked to become involved in political arguments. As with all special advisers, Alastair Campbell's appointment helps to preserve impartiality. *[Interruption.]* I look forward to hearing less of the raucous shouting and more inclination to deal with reality.

The civil servants with whom we work have not complained, and their trade unions have spoken in support of our policies.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the Minister give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: Not at the moment. Let me deal with the media monitoring unit to which the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire also referred. There is, indeed, an attempt to monitor the media; all Governments have done it.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the Minister give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: I just want to finish this point. I have given way to the hon. Gentleman already. Media monitoring is an important aspect of Government policy and is intended to correct inaccuracies. All Governments have done it. The media move faster today, and there are many more outlets. That means more questions to which people expect a faster response.

We have a duty to respond, to keep the public informed about what we are doing. We need the staff and the technology to make that possible in today's media world. We are not ashamed of that; I think that it leads to better information for the public whom we serve.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire also referred to changes of press officer in the past two and a half years. During the similar period from 1979 to 1981, the number of changes was comparable. There are many reasons for such changes; some are personal, some arise from recruitment, some result from promotion and so on. We have never tried to hide any change that has taken place.

The hon. Gentleman argued that Ministers are not accountable. Unlike previous Governments, we have set high standards for Ministers, and we expect them to be upheld. I welcomed Lord Neill's statement last week that there is less cause for concern about standards in public life than there was when the cash for questions affair led to the setting up of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. I also welcomed his statement that there was no need for an independent ethics commissioner to investigate alleged abuses by Ministers. Since we came to office, we have strengthened the ministerial code to make sure that it worked effectively.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire argued that democratic accountability had diminished under the Labour Government. In fact, the opposite is true: we have strengthened ministerial accountability. Devolution is enhancing democratic accountability, bringing government closer to the people of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, ultimately, London. We have brought democracy out of the dark ages by abolishing the voting rights of hereditary peers. We have increased parliamentary accountability by introducing pre-legislative scrutiny of some draft Bills, as the previous Government did not.

Labour Ministers have made nearly twice as many oral statements in the House—80 in 1998–99, compared with 45 in 1993–94. Ministers are being held to account more often as a result of Westminster Hall debates. We are increasing the opportunities for Opposition Members to hold us to account. It is not our fault that the press do the job better than the Opposition.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way at last. We all know that statements are given first to the press. Given her experience in Northern Ireland, she may wish to read today's *Evening Standard*, and to discover that the statement that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is to make in the House tomorrow has been given to the press today.

Marjorie Mowlam: I was making the point that pre-legislative scrutiny allows more people to be included in consultation. That can only help us to make decent policy. We have increased the openness of government. The Freedom of Information Bill will involve everyone more closely in decisions that affect their lives. The Representation of the People Bill will increase access to democracy by improving disabled access to polling booths and setting up a rolling electoral register to maximise people's opportunities to vote. The Political Parties, Referendums and Elections Bill will ban foreign donations, and require donations of more than £5,000 to be published and the donor to be identified.

In the past three years, we have begun to transform the ways in which the government can be held to account. We are proud of that record, and the Conservative party, with its history of secrecy and scandal, can have little of value to say about it.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): A few minutes ago, the Minister said that her party had introduced pre-legislative scrutiny. May I suggest that tomorrow she visits the so-called "truth office" in Downing Street to discuss that matter? If that unit is concerned with the truth, it will tell the Minister that what she has told the House is incorrect. In fact, the previous Government introduced pre-legislative scrutiny on, among other things, legislation on Sunday trading and abortion.

Marjorie Mowlam: That was done on specific issues such as private Members' Bills or matters on which that Government were split. We are introducing pre-legislative scrutiny on legislation so that parties across the House may consider it in advance.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire made allegations about task forces. There are clear lines of accountability for task forces. They are accountable to Ministers, and Ministers are accountable to Parliament. We make no apology for using task forces to crack problems that we inherited from the previous Government. They include more people with a wide

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variety of views. They involve experts as well as those whom the policy will affect. Task forces are a less centralised and a more accountable way of working. For the first time, the Government are publishing details of each task force, including membership, and updating those details every six months.

One example is the social exclusion unit, which has policy action teams. For each policy, a committee is created comprising civil servants plus 100 or so people from outside, which allows the inclusion of a range of views previously not heard. The recent independent Democratic Audit report on Government task forces said:

"We welcome the government's attempts to be more inclusive in its approach to policy review and implementation . . . to make the consultative and advice-seeking process more open to the public and to make it more inclusive of different kinds of expertise from civil society."

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire also implied that we appoint people out of favouritism—*[Interruption.]* "Tony's cronies," as someone on the Opposition Benches says. I do not want to get into personal politics, but the individuals whom we have appointed across task forces provide good examples of our approach. David Mellor was appointed to chair the football task force; Chris Patten chaired the independent commission on policing in Northern Ireland; Lord Wakeham chairs the royal commission on reform of the House of Lords; Lord Mayhew chairs the advisory committee on business appointments; and Baroness Chalker is on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office panel of the 2000 advisory group. We have chosen those people for their expertise in particular areas. The cronyism argument does not hold up.

The Government are committed to openness and accountability. We made a contract with the people at the last election to clean up politics, to make them open and accountable. That is what we have done in our first two years. I remind the House again of Lord Neill's observation that there is less concern about standards in public life than there has been since the cash for questions affair led to the setting up of the Committee on Standards in Public Life under the previous Government.

We have come a long way, but we are far from complacent. We shall continue to work to clean up government. We shall work to rid ourselves of the legacy of distrust left behind by the Conservatives. We shall deliver, as cost-effectively and efficiently as we can, good government for the people of our country.

7.58 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): The Minister will be reassured to know that we accept that the Government need special advisers. That is not a fundamental problem. Government, after all, is about politics, and the need for political advice within the machinery of Government is accepted. It was an established fact under the previous Government. The question is not whether we should have policy advisers of a political character, but what the balance should be between political presentation and what is developed as policy advice.

I am slightly taken aback by the complacency, or perhaps the inconsistency, of the Conservative attack—it is as if there had been no continuity of practice between the previous Conservative Government and the present Labour Government. There were highly political advisers to the previous Government; for example, Bernard Ingham was a highly political member of that Government, who spun stories against Ministers. I suspect that some of the frustration and anger of Conservative Members is due to the fact that Labour have been more successful at using advisers for positive political affect, rather than for the succession of public relations disasters that harried the Tories out of office.

We need to ask whether we are imposing a more political management on to the civil service. The Minister for the Cabinet Office, does not think so. I do not necessarily disagree, but one or two developments have given rise to the question. For example, to give powers to Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell to direct civil servants raises the question that there could be a tension between political advisers and civil servants—as was pointed out in an intervention. That might compromise the integrity of the service.

Ed Balls was a special adviser and I do not question his ability or the quality of his advice. However, to take him from that role to the position of chief economic adviser to the Treasury in one seamless move, without open advertisement or consultation raises questions about privilege and the process of association. Somewhere, there must be people who thought that they might have got that job, but, until it was filled, they did not even know that it had been vacant. Those are reasonable questions and the Government should consider them.

The point has already been made that expenditure on entertaining, on the press, on publicity and on the number of special advisers has risen under the Labour Government. Since they came into office, the number of special advisers has risen from 38 to 74—nearly double. What effect does that have on the political process? It does not always add anything to that process. The Prime Minister may have read in today's press of the collapse in his personal support—he was the most popular politician, but his approval rating is now only plus 9 per cent. The right hon. Lady emerges as the most popular politician in the country, a fact in which she no doubt takes comfort. Perhaps the Prime Minister might consider whether part of that collapse is the result of his and the Government's obsession with news management and presentation over substance. Over time, people will judge Governments on substance.

Under the previous Government, I sat on several Committees as my party's Treasury spokesman and noted that Labour Members, in opposition, were terrified to commit themselves to any firm policy. Whenever they were under pressure to state their policy, their ploy was to call for a policy review. On our calculations, by the time of the last election, they had asked for 1,000 policy reviews. That might have been understandable when they were in opposition. They wanted to be elected; it saved them from committing to anything and showed that they were interested in policy.

However, although they are now in government, with the responsibility for making decisions, it does not seem that that instinct has been much curbed. The Government set targets; they set up task forces and review groups, all of which are designed to keep the policy process moving. They produce an annual report in which, miraculously, all their targets appear to have been achieved—although the Government's interpretation of an achievement is not

what most people would always recognise. For example, one target was that there would be a referendum on Britain's entry into the euro. The report described that as "achieved". We still intend to have a referendum on entry. There are several other targets of the same character.

The problem is that the Government set and evaluate their own targets and, then, in their annual report, claim that the targets have been achieved. There have been problems with some of the targets. They have used most regularly those for class sizes and waiting lists. Class sizes for years one, two and three have probably gone down, although they have not yet reached the Government's overall objective. However, although it was not part of Labour's pledge, it is noticeable that class sizes for years four, five, six and seven and the sizes of secondary classes have all gone up. That means that the Government's claim was rather partial.

Hospital waiting lists were coming down, but, after the flu epidemic, it has been acknowledged that they are likely to rise. However, we have discovered that the lists are being reduced by putting people on lists to get on to the waiting lists. The Government may say that they are meeting their targets, but the public say that as that does not change the quality of the service, the targets are not relevant. I do not imply that the targets were not genuine, but they cannot be defined in that narrow way.

I do not often quote *The Daily Telegraph*, but its leader of 10 January summarises the matter rather well. It states:

"Fortunately, on the question of whether the targets are being met, we are able to listen to the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott. He admits that 'because the targets are demanding, they are not always achieved'. Given that targets—which were always met, naturally—were a favourite tool of Communist governments to demonstrate their supposed efficiency, we should be on the watch for the day when the Government announces that all the trains are running on time. Targets are useful, but only when the electorate, and not the government, is the judge of whether they have been met."

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): If my hon. Friend had been in the House earlier this afternoon, he would have heard one such example of over-hype when the Secretary of State for Health told us about 100 new intensive care beds. However, despite the fact that he had had almost a week's notice of today's debate, when push came to shove, he was able to tell us where only eight of them were.

Mr. Bruce: That is an example of the problem.

We can all have a little bit of fun at the Government's expense. Sometimes these debates form a legitimate part of that process. However, the Government must address the fact that, if the public become cynical about targets and do not think that they have honestly been met, or if the targets are renewed and redefined when they are not being met, or if the public can tell that what surrounds the targets does not add up—that there are no genuine improvements to the quality of service—no amount of presentation will get the Government off the hook.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is especially remarkable that, during the past few days, in Standing Committee, the Government have rejected attempts by his party and by the Conservatives to ensure that the Comptroller and Auditor General audits the performance target results?

Mr. Bruce: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. That is a point that we have been making for some time.

I challenge the Government that—although it might be an uncomfortable suggestion to Governments wrestling with genuine difficulties and uncertainties—the crucial test will be whether government by objectives and outcomes will be a real part of the process, rather than a synthetic sham. If the Government are the only determinant of whether they are achieving their targets and can redefine those targets, the public will become cynical.

I offer some advice. In their comprehensive spending review, the Government have got into the habit of triple accounting—globally adding up the cumulative effect of all their spending plans to telephone numbers that are meaningless. I doubt that the average Member of the House—never mind the wider public—can really conceive of the difference between £2 billion and £20 billion in regard to what those amounts can achieve. We want to know what the practical difference will be, in a way that we can all understand. By hyping the figures to the largest possible amount, the Government have raised public expectations to an unsustainable degree. They are now reaping the consequences.

Another problem is the role of the House. I have been in the House for 16 years, visited and talked to parliamentarians in other legislatures and shared experiences with them. By comparison with many others, we are a pretty weak and ineffective Parliament and that is because the Executive do not use Parliament as part of the process. They do not recognise—it makes no difference which party is in government—that politicians from both sides of the House could make a contribution to many policy issues. They have experience of representation, not all of which is party political, and that fact does not deny that the Government will ultimately decide and use their majority to do so.

When I came to the House, I had the naive belief that we had heated, public debates on the principle of a Bill in the Chamber, but we then went into Committee where everyone sat down and worked through in a business-like way how to make the legislation work. What a load of baloney! I am not saying that it has never happened—there must have been one or two occasions when it has—but I can rarely think of an occasion when a Government have been really willing to work with a Committee in those terms. That makes many Members feel frustrated, given their and the public's expectations of what we should be doing.

I wholly agree that it would be good if the House had more say in helping to determine Government objectives and on how their targets should be set and monitored. That would raise the standard of debate and public confidence in Parliament and in politics. A bold Government might regard that as something that would benefit them as well as the political process. However, I fear that this Government are more concerned with the management of the process.

When I read the note on the knowledge network project, which has already been mentioned, I was appalled at what it was supposed to do. According to documents obtained by *The Guardian*, its objective was to

"explain the Government's core message so that citizens can get the full facts without going through the distorting prism of media reporting."

The article continues:

"It will take the form of a computer network into which every Department can feed their 'lines to take' on every key issue and from which every Department can read."

[Mr. Bruce]

The Kremlin would have been proud of that turn of phrase. In other words, the project will produce the line to be defended at all times. It does not provide substance to the belief that there is the degree of inclusiveness that the Government like to boast about.

Mr. Miller: May I remind the hon. Gentleman of his comments on *The Daily Telegraph*? He said that he was reluctant to quote from it regularly. That point acknowledged that the process of media communication distorts what is said in the House by, for example, the hon. Gentleman and by Government. Does he not acknowledge that there is a place for direct communication—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman communicates regularly with his constituents—between public and Parliament that bypasses the organs of the daily press?

Mr. Bruce: Yes. I used a turn of phrase that suggested that the media were some kind of obstacle to the process rather than a different component of it. That is a different matter. My speech has balanced a quote from *The Guardian* with one from *The Daily Telegraph*. On this occasion, I agree with what *The Daily Telegraph* said.

The Government tell us that we do not understand the process and they change the targets and the terminology. Since the turn of the year, we have seen what I suspect is a whole new battery of neo-Poujadism emanating in particular from the Home Office. Those who deign to criticise the Government or the Government's programme are either described as woolly Liberals or as the massed ranks of Conservatism. That does not leave much room for anyone else. The more spin doctors there are, the more targets they develop. That means more confusion and disillusionment with the process of government.

The process has sunk to a particular depth in the use of special advisers specifically to brief Labour Members on the party line. That is clear abuse of the process. The Conservatives have come under inquisition for their use of Short money for campaigning purposes. I am not here to defend the Conservative party, but it is difficult to see how using special advisers to brief Labour Members at the taxpayers' expense is different from using Short money to support the Conservative's campaigns. If one is wrong, the other must also be wrong. On that basis, if the Conservatives will have to pay the money back, will the Labour party pay it back to balance things out?

I wish to raise a serious point—I do not think that this will surprise the House—that explains why I and Liberal Democrats are so committed to radical constitutional reform. We want a written constitution, a representative voting system, a federal constitution and an elected second Chamber to enhance the role of Parliament in developing and monitoring public policy. We believe that such reforms are pivotal to securing that aim.

On the passivity of the House, can anyone remember when it last rejected even a component of a Budget? We have not rejected a Budget, and even the European Parliament, which is so reviled by the Tory Opposition, has shown more spine than that.

I am a strong supporter of devolution and I tell those who criticise it that there is something already to be learned from the process that we have set up in Scotland. Andrew Cubie's committee, which was appointed by the Scottish Executive, has produced a more considered review of policy on student finance and university funding than anything that the Department for Education and Employment would even be allowed to think about. That is pluralism and it should not be an embarrassment. It is what devolution is designed to do. It allows different ideas to be explored in a different context. However, we hear that Downing street and the Department for Education and Employment are appalled at that degree of independence.

The truth at the end of the day is that new Labour will reap what it sows. To Liberal Democrats, the desert of Tory spending commitments reaps the whirlwind of public anger over the state of the national health service. Reannouncing the same funding over and over, and triple counting spending pledges will yield good headlines in the short run. However, if responses and resources are not there, the targets are not real and the objectives are not met Alastair Campbell's team may spin like whirling dervishes but it will not fool the British people.

8.18 pm

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): I should declare an interest, if not necessarily an expertise, as a former special adviser. It is principally on that subject that I want to contribute to the debate. Four points have been raised about the role of special advisers. They relate to the existence and legitimacy of special advisers, their effect on government and governance, their numbers and the extent to which they help the effectiveness of government.

There has been much media comment on special advisers and the Opposition have made great play of the issue tonight. For example, the *Financial Times* has referred to the shadowy role of special advisers in general and a leader in the *Evening Standard* said:

> "It is a scandal that ministers' special advisers are paid from the public purse to advise their bosses about the likely consequences of their actions on party and public opinion."

Conservative Members nod, which is helpful because those quotes are from 1989 and 1993 when the Conservative party was in government. They merely demonstrate that advisers work for all Governments and it is right and proper that they should be under continual scrutiny. The righteous indignation to which the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) treated us about special advisers and this Government was not quite as righteous as it seemed.

I shall deal first with legitimacy. The truth is that special advisers have existed in their current form for about a quarter of a century, although I read with interest in the Neill report that the very first special adviser was appointed by Lloyd George. That may not be the best precedent to follow, but it was almost a century ago.

We know that special advisers are curious creatures in the civil service because they are appointed by Ministers and last only as long as the Minister who appointed them. They are required to abide by the civil service code of conduct but, for obvious reasons, are free from the restrictions on political activity. As I pointed out in a recent debate in Westminster Hall, my letter of appointment rather pointedly stated that special advisers are free from the requirement that normally all civil servants should be appointed on merit. I always thought that that was a rather gentle way for the civil service to remind special advisers that they are not quite the same as the people with whom they are working.

Why has the system evolved? Rightly, Ministers want a source of advice and expertise that civil servants cannot and, as I think all hon. Members would agree, should not be asked to provide. That expertise, as well as covering the Department's policy area, may deal with presentation of policy. Above all, special advisers bring to the job an understanding and knowledge of the governing party's politics, its history and the background to its policy debates.

I shall give a simple example. A civil servant could, technically speaking, design a perfect policy, such as—to pick an example at random—the poll tax, but a sensible adviser would recognise it as being politically unworkable and advise against it. It is a great pity that there was not such an adviser in the previous Government because they would have saved billions of pounds if someone had been able to say, "Sorry, that isn't going to work."

The key point, however, is that Ministers get that advice from a particular perspective, which is a point that the model contract specifically refers to. It says—and I welcome this—that

"the civil service has no monopoly of policy analysis and advice".

We could argue, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office pointed out, that the existence of advisers helps to shield civil servants from pressures that they might otherwise face.

In a very British way, we have evolved a compromise because we have avoided a situation in which Opposition politicians who come into government are forced to leave behind the people with whom they have worked very closely in opposition. In the case of those Members sitting on the Opposition Front Bench today, those advisers are paid for out of Short money at public expense, and rightly so. I have no argument with that. We do not put politicians into the civil service machinery bereft of the support and advice network that they have relied on. That would be nonsensical.

On the other hand, we avoid the spoils system that operates in countries such as the United States, where a change of Administration results in the whole top tier of the civil service being removed and placemen and placewomen being appointed. That is why I think that the Neill committee got it right when it said:

"special advisers have a valuable role to play".

I say to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire that if there were any evidence of malign influence, a threat to the impartiality of the civil service or any undermining of the values of civil servants, I would have expected the Neill committee to identify that and refer to it in its report. It did not do so because that is not the case. In fact, Neill explicitly recognises the legitimacy of special advisers, and I trust that the House will as well.

The second issue is the effect of special advisers on the process of government. I happen to think that the current group of special advisers are very professional and effective. Indeed, they are rather more effective than their predecessors before May 1997, which may, in part, explain the Opposition's sense of grievance about them this evening.

Advisers act as the eyes and ears of Ministers, and with the complexities of modern government, which the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) referred to, and the sheer volume of submissions that emerge from what I call the departmental silos and fall on to the Minister's desk, it is important that special advisers support Ministers in trying to sift through those submissions.

In my experience, the dialogue between advisers and civil servants was helpful in clarifying issues, which meant that the submission that was finally presented to a Minister had benefited from advice from both of those perspectives. Those perspectives are different but they are both recognised within the system. That system can work only on the basis of trust and respect for those different standpoints. It is essential that advisers advise, civil servants advise and Ministers, who are accountable to this House, decide. Nothing must ever get in the way of that fundamental principle.

On the question of numbers, we must be careful not to confuse influx with influence. The shadow Leader of the House said in his evidence to the Neill committee that we would

"begin to change the nature of the debate and the way a Civil Service department operates—if the special advisers became, as it were, the dominant influence on the Minister rather than the civil servants."

That argument has more to do with the relative quality of the advice than with the number of advisers because if one took that argument to its logical conclusion, one adviser could be one too many if he or she were that influential. In practice, as we know, the 70 or so advisers in the civil service are opposed to—I do not mean in a policy sense—several hundred thousand civil servants, which is hardly an equal contest. I do not think that the numbers argument is credible.

My final point is about effectiveness. I thought that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire strained credulity in a slightly half-hearted contribution, not least because the Government have been extremely effective in organising the machinery of government to try to achieve their objectives.

I shall reflect for a moment on my experience as a special adviser in the Department for Education and Employment and some of the measures that the Government have set in train. The hon. Member for Gordon referred to the fact that we are on our way to meeting our class size pledge. Hopefully, by the end of this Parliament we will have nearly doubled the number of early years education places and doubled capital investment in school buildings and equipment.

We are supporting primary schools, in particular, in raising standards of numeracy and literacy. We have gone from having no numeracy and literacy summer schools before the last general election to running 1,500 this year. We have put about 10 million new books into schools, courtesy of the extra money that we have invested. We are investing about £1 billion to support information and communication technologies.

We have made a record investment in further education, which was sadly neglected and greatly punished under the previous Government. We are working towards enabling 50 per cent. of our young people to benefit from higher education and we have managed to more than halve long-term youth unemployment. I simply say, modestly and quietly, that if that is not getting on with the business of government, and if that is not substance, then I do not know what is.

There is a great deal still to be achieved. However, what really lies behind the motion is that the Opposition are attacking the messengers, the special advisers, who cannot speak for themselves. I was keen to contribute to the debate because they cannot respond to the attacks that have been made on them tonight. When we come to the

[Mr. Hilary Benn]

next general election, I think that the Opposition are afraid that the electorate will demonstrate, as at the previous general election, that they rather like the message.

8.28 pm

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): In addressing the motion and the Government's amendment, I ask myself why I feel such deep antipathy to the Government's spin-doctoring techniques. In a way, it is because I feel for the Government. The tragedy for the Government and for the country is that they think that they can do no wrong, which is a dangerous thing to believe. To believe one's own propaganda, as the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) obviously does, is a tragedy for a politician.

I resent that belief because it leads the Prime Minister into making some serious charges against the Opposition that I do not think are sustainable. Each week, I sit on the Opposition Benches to hear the saintly Prime Minister accuse me of the most heinous crimes against humanity. I am told that I do not want a national health service, to reduce unemployment, to help the developing world or care about crime, poverty and social exclusion because I am a Tory, which makes it impossible.

I have news for the Prime Minister and for his right hon. and hon. Friends. He is wrong. Right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House care passionately about such matters. Our difference is often, but not always, about means, not ends. I accept that there are issues on which we disagree about the ends too, such as the future of sterling, the future of the United Kingdom, our right to participate in country sports and to eat particular foods.

The dreadful way in which the Government have been caught up in the web of their own deception means that they can no longer see that essential truth, and that makes their attacks curiously offensive. The Prime Minister seems genuinely to believe that the answers to the problems that will always exist in any democratic society lie in bigger government and more politicians. That goes to the heart of the Opposition's motion. He seems to believe that the answer to Britain's problem is more politicians in Wales, Scotland and everywhere else, including this place. We should try to reduce the number of Members here, not increase them as the Boundary Commission inevitably does.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Resign.

Mr. Luff: I will if you will. I am not referring to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but to the hon. Gentleman.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said that 359 new politicians are the result of the Government's policy, and that is not the answer to our problems. I heard the Minister for the Cabinet Office deny the increase in public expenditure for the management of central Government. I have the figures. Last year, we were planning to cut it by £223 million. Instead, the Government increased it by £967 million. That is £1,190 million extra. This year, our planned cut is £114 million. The Government's increase will be £1,104 million. That is a total over two years of £2,408 million. That is the increase in the cost of government that the Government have imposed on us. That is because they genuinely believe—this is the tragedy—that that is the right way to run a country. It is not.

The regional development agencies were rightly highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire. He said that they cost about £69 million. These monsters have laboured mightily to bring forward their regional strategies.

I have the strategy of "Advantage West Midlands", the West Midlands regional development agency. In an earlier debate, I highlighted the facile gibberish of the language in which it is written, but what of the content? The glossy and unreadable document includes such surprising insights as:

"Research shows that people with the highest skill levels are most likely to find and keep employment and enjoy higher earnings."

As Michael Caine would say, "Not a lot of people know that."

Later we read:

"Transport is seen as being very important for growth."

I am grateful to the agency for this fresh insight into the workings of the United Kingdom economy.

When the agency is not offering such insights, it is threatening to meddle where it is not wanted. The document states:

"'Advantage West Midlands' has no responsibility for housing".

That does not stop it from stating that it intends

"to play an effective role in helping to co-ordinate housing and regeneration strategies across the region."

It knows absolutely nothing about the region. How can it seriously say:

"It is the blend of culture, unique histories and shared futures that defines the West Midlands'"?

That defines every arbitrarily drawn region of the United Kingdom. It is a load of nonsense. Nothing defines the west midlands except some arbitrary lines drawn on a map by a bureaucrat.

Mr. Paterson: I entirely endorse all my hon. Friend's comments on regional development agencies and the west midlands region. The people of Shropshire bitterly resent being lumped in with the central conurbation of the west midlands, which will dominate all RDA decisions. They will be the country cousins, left out on a limb.

Mr. Luff: I am glad that I gave way to my hon. Friend, who makes exactly my point. The people of Worcestershire have exactly the same feeling. How do you think I felt, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as Chairman of the Select Committee on Agriculture, to read that the West Midlands RDA says implicitly of my constituency:

"The main problems generally include . . . too much reliance on farming and forestry"?

That is an opportunity, not a problem. Birmingham-based bureaucrats of the agency that was imposed on us by the Government do not understand that.

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): For the record, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that he was an adviser to Lord Walker, the former

Secretary of State for the Environment—the very gentleman who drew up the boundaries of the west midlands and the other English regions?

Mr. Luff: I do not want to have a debate about that. Of course the boundaries are useful for administrative purposes and for gathering statistics, but that does not mean that the people of Worcestershire should be run from Birmingham. Will the Minister get that simple thought into his very small brain?

Of course we must carve up countries for administrative and statistical purposes. That has some passing relevance, but it does not mean that the historic counties of England must be run from remote places such as Birmingham, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) rightly said.

It is not just the development agencies, but the Government who write dreadful documents. I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), who is not now present, refer to the wretched little document entitled "The Government's annual report". Rightly, he poured ridicule upon it. It is a check list of completed actions. It states, for example:

"The Royal Commission on Long-term Care. Done."

It is true that it has been done. It has been well and truly done, ignored, pigeon-holed and forgotten, because its recommendations were too difficult.

The report goes on to refer to

"The referendum on voting systems",

as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition pointed out last week. That is said to be "On course." Yes—on course for the waste paper basket. The report continues:

"Simplify Government. On course. See page 57."

I saw page 57 and could not understand it.

A further entry reads:

"Hold referendum on any EMU decision. Kept."

Excuse me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, did I miss the referendum? Was I asleep?

The Government had to buy half the copies of this wretched little document. They claim that the other 49,000 were sold. I should love to see Tesco's sales figures. The document should never have been produced. It goes to the heart of this dreadful Government and the motion rightly tabled by the Opposition.

Mr. Tyrie: Does my hon. Friend agree that the most extraordinary part of the document is the last page, headed "Your say", which I suppose is Labour's dim attempt at some form of accountability to the public? It states that last year, the Government asked people's views and have published a cross-section of them on the opposite page. All we get back is a little tapestry of cuttings, rather than a serious account of people's views. It is supposed to be a serious public document.

Mr. Luff: My hon. Friend is right. That hardly encourages people to believe that, in the new, open, inclusive style of government of which the Government boast, their views are being taken seriously. I am grateful to him for making an important point.

With regard to the new deal, the Government are once again in danger of believing their own propaganda. They seem to think that their huge expenditure has created jobs. It has not. The jobs were being created by the private sector. Youth unemployment was collapsing under the previous Government because of the success of their economic policies.

The present Government have spent £20 million of our money—taxpayers' money—on promoting the wretched new deal. They are doing so for party political advantage. They are trying to be seen to do something about unemployment. That is a monstrous use of money. New jobs are being created not by the Government, their bureaucrats or the new deal, but by hard-working small business men and women, who were doing so anyway without the Government's meddling interference.

Others want to speak, so I shall be brief. The Minister's research was quite good. He suggested that I was a special adviser to Lord Walker of Worcester. I was not. I was a special adviser between 1987 and 1989 to Lord Young of Graffham at the Department of Trade and Industry.

I freely admit that special advisers have a useful role to play. That is why the previous Government had a number of them. They can bridge the gap between civil service and party, work alongside Parliamentary Private Secretaries on parliamentary liaison, and inject original thinking into policy making. They are an extra set of eyes and ears for the Minister.

All that is good, but their role is not, as the special advisers of this Government seem to think, to promote party at public expense, to undermine the Government information service or to brief against other Ministers. It is clear that that is happening in spades in the Government.

We must cap the numbers. What justification is there for increasing the number of special advisers at No. 10 from eight under the previous Government to 22 under the present Government?

Mr. Tyrie: Twenty five.

Mr. Luff: Twenty five, I am told—a huge number. The same applies to press officers. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire rightly highlighted the sacking of the Government information officers. It is a scandal—an outrage. The Government's attitude seems to be, "Clear them out and make room for people who are more compliant with our wishes." It is not often appreciated that Alastair Campbell has a spy in every Department. Campbell's cronies bully and intimidate their colleagues and journalists. They may be civil servants now, but a year or two ago, many were Labour press officers or Labour party officials. That is an outrage.

As Conservative Members frequently point out, the Government are more obsessed with spin doctors than real doctors, and with glamour rather than the gritty reality of improving public services. The Government are run by elites for elites. In November 1998, a letter from Dr. Richard Mullen to *The Daily Telegraph* discussed the BBC's excellent serialisation of "Vanity Fair" by Thackeray. It also commented on Thackeray's "Book of Snobs". Dr. Mullen said that, in that book, people

"would find much that is apt today. Thackeray's best writing was done in an age full of prattle about 'reform'—Victorian English for modernisation—when a section of the middle class succeeded in grabbing power from the House of Lords.

These 'Liberals' ruled for what they endlessly proclaimed was the benefit of 'the People', but their rule always benefited the prattlers themselves. Thackeray was superb in exposing the cant and hypocrisy of such stuff.

How he would have relished the sight of Blairites invoking the sacred mantra of 'the People', while a deferential 'wait-person' delicately shaves white truffles on to their polenta, or pointing out how they spend more on their wallpaper than they pay hard-working nurses."

My hon. Friends laugh. I agree that it would be funny if we were not considering a subject as serious as government. It is not funny, but frightening. This bloated, complacent, arrogant Government resemble Falstaff in Verdi's opera or Don Giovanni in Mozart's. Their end was always inevitable; it was only a question of when and how. For the Prime Minister's sake, I hope that the end is characterised by the recantation and forgiveness of Falstaff, not the damnation of Don Giovanni.

8.41 pm

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): It will be hard to maintain the unusual excitement that was generated by the hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff). Unlike both previous speakers, I have never been a special adviser to the Government, or wished to be such. I have worked in the private sector for 20 years, trying to create wealth in this country. That implies no criticism of hon. Members who have been special advisers, but it shows that other perspectives can inform the debate.

The charge is that the Government have politicised and fattened central government. I concede that a substantial change has occurred in the way in which central Government govern. That process has not gone far enough, but the right strategic choices have been made. From the mess of departmentalised policy silos, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) referred, and agency government, which was the legacy of the previous Administration, customer and citizen-focused provision, based on measurable objectives, has begun to emerge. From a highly educated but often numbing culture of introversion in our civil service, there are signs of recognition of the need to encompass genuinely new skills and backgrounds and to adopt an outward-looking perspective. From a culture in which ministerial accountability was muddled at best and denied at worst, there is growing recognition of the need to accept ownership of the goals and administrative competence of performance in Government.

I shall explore those themes. In information technology, strategy, project definition and management have, until now, been handled by individual Departments. That has meant a lack of purchasing strategy. A multiplicity of purchasing decisions makes for increased inefficiency and overall waste. A confusion of technologies and methodologies makes assembling a complex project difficult. There is no critical mass of project skills. Reference has been made in previous debates to the relatively small number of civil servants who have key skills in managing complex information technology projects. Silos with often impermeable boundaries mean that no learning occurs from experiences elsewhere. It is hard to grasp why something goes wrong or why other things succeed in particular projects, and to learn from that outside the silo.

It is hard for citizen access to be organised beyond simply the front end of a web page and there is no governmental strategic vision relating information services to policy goals. Those gaps have been obvious for a considerable time—certainly throughout the latter part of the previous Administration—and the outcome has been an array of failed, poor-quality, expensive systems. That process was inevitable, but the Government have recognised those faults and started to remedy them, strengthening the central IT function and developing a strategy.

We have made a critical start and a key choice in setting things right: our civil service culture has recognised the need to increase recruitment from the private sector, introduce outward-looking processes such as benchmarking, recognise the need for cultural change and develop new leaders, greater openness and greater co-working.

Encompassed in Sir Richard Wilson's report, which I suspect has probably not met the eyes of many Conservative Members, is a clear vision for the civil service of the future. It is relatively brief, and is worth repeating in full because it places in context some of the remarks about the demoralisation of the civil service and its difficulties in working with the Government:

"Our aim is to help make the UK a better place for everyone to live in, and support its success in the world. We want to be the best at everything we do.

In support of successive administrations, we will:

act with integrity, propriety, and political impartiality, and select on merit; put the public's interests first; achieve results of high quality and good value; show leadership and take personal responsibility; value the people we work with and their diversity; innovate and learn; work in partnership; be professional in all we do; be open and communicate well".

The report clearly bears no resemblance whatever to Conservative Members' perception of morale and focus in the civil service, which is serving today's Government and will serve future Governments of any political complexion. It paints a picture of focused determination, not demoralisation or despair.

The establishment of cross-departmental teams to tackle a wide range of issues is a hallmark of this Government and the phrase "joined-up government" has entered the dictionary. I refer to the White Paper on modernising government, which gives some of the reasons why joined-up government—which is an innovation of theirs, in large part—is necessary:

"People had to give the same information more than once to different—or even the same—organisations. A mother of a boy with physical disabilities said: 'I have lost count of the times I have had to recount my son's case history to professionals involved in his care.'

There is often no obvious person to help those most in need to find their way around the system.

There is a lack of integrated information to enable service providers to give a full picture of what help might be available.

There is minimal use of new technology. Most government Departments have a website, but few allow people to fill in forms on line. And government websites are not well linked to other relevant sites."

That paints a pretty clear picture of the problem that faced the Government on coming to office: a fragmented service often offered excellent quality in isolation, but did not work together to achieve the needs of the individual customer or citizen it was working towards. It had failed to adopt business practices—one would hardly say modern business practices—that focused on the needs of the customer or individual it was seeking to serve. Instead, it focused introvertedly on the departmental mechanisms on which people's rewards were often based.

At last, one can expect issues of social exclusion to be addressed by all relevant agencies. The sure start initiative and others for tackling drugs and for redesigning our

criminal justice system all require a multi-agency, multi-departmental approach. That is to be commended, yet we have heard not a word of such innovation from Conservative Members.

When I attended a meeting to discuss rough sleepers recently, I was struck by the immediate recognition of the important role of the Ministry of Defence. In fact, the importance of that role would be obvious to any citizen dealing with such problems. As most of us will have observed, many who find a place on the streets have left the armed services relatively recently. It is shameful to have to admit that the recognition of the need for Departments to work together to address problems is novel. We did not see a great deal of it during the 18 years that we witnessed previously.

The establishment of regional development agencies has been criticised today, but I think that it has enabled local communities to apply upward pressure in arguing for joint initiatives. Regional offices of government have begun to consider joint solutions to many obvious regional problems. It is easy to deride the way in which an RDA has drawn up its strategy. I do not live in, or represent, an area in the west midlands; my seat is in the east midlands. The strategy in the east midlands has been widely commended, has set extremely high standards and has drawn attention to a variety of issues that require attention, across the entire scope of government service.

At the highest level, the performance and innovation unit has addressed a range of cross-departmental issues for the future. We look forward to, for example, its pronouncements on the study of the Post Office, which will almost certainly demand a cross-departmental response. High-level reports such as that provide a critical input into Government thinking for the future. The comprehensive spending review also addressed the need to realign budgets in the direction of clear political goals.

As for accountability, in debates such as this, one is often struck by the shortness of Conservative memories. Few could forget the performance of the former Home Secretary, who claimed that the conduct of prisons was a matter not for him but for the Prison Service—*[Interruption.]* I am afraid that my hearing is sometimes very poor in the Chamber. I did not catch what was said by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson).

Mr. Paterson: I said that the former Home Secretary had reduced the amount of crime, which I would have thought was the fundamental role of a Home Secretary.

Mr. Todd: That trend has continued under the present Government, if we take their time in office as a whole. In any event, that does not constitute a response to the question of accountability, which I understood to be the focus of the debate requested by the Opposition.

I was present at the debate on the Passport Agency and its performance. It is worth contrasting the performance of the last Home Secretary with the frank apology offered by the current Home Secretary. There was no attempt to blame the civil service; rather, there was a recognition that Ministers were accountable for performances of that kind. The stark contrast between the two approaches struck me at the time.

The phrase "boom and bust" has become almost a catchphrase in Government, so I will use another. We will take no lessons on this from the last Government. I have not used those words before, but they seem singularly appropriate in this instance. When it comes to accountability in Government, there is little to be learned from the 18 years of Conservative administration.

Without dissolving that accountability, the present Government have also sought to consult more widely. The pre-legislative process has been extended to cover major Bills, which has helped to isolate the issues that divide us—the existence of such issues is inevitable—from genuine discussion of how best to manage specific policy choices. Changing a complex and history-ridden institution and political process is hard and frustrating, but the right choices have been made so far. The management of those choices will be challenging, and mistakes will be made. Improving management quality at both civil service and political level will be necessary, but excellent progress has been made.

The motion snipes at the fringes of the issue. The Opposition spurned the opportunity to tackle many of these opportunities during their 18 years in government, and I see little reason to listen to them now.

8.54 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): It is a great pleasure to be called to speak in the debate on the cost of central Government.

I thought that it would be interesting to go back to 1997, when the Government set out with such high hopes. The Labour manifesto bluntly said:

"We have modernised the Labour Party and we will modernise Britain. This means knowing where we want to go; being clear-headed about the country's future; telling the truth; making tough choices . . . being prepared to give a moral lead where government has responsibilities it should not avoid."

I wonder what Lord Winston thinks of that in the light of this week's events.

I have much simpler beliefs. I think that people are happier with less government, fewer politicians, fewer bureaucrats and therefore less taxation. I can think of no country that has been made more successful by an increase in Government activity, or in taxation. In the light of that, I am appalled at what has happened in the past two and three quarter years.

The second line of the motion expresses regret that

"this means resources are not reaching front-line public services".

They certainly are not in Shropshire. Not one publicly funded service in Shropshire is adequately funded. The Government have wilfully shifted £500 million from the shire counties to the inner cities. One can see it immediately.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) dug out some figures in a written answer, which show that the average pupil in a Shropshire primary school receives £2,220, whereas a pupil in a Southwark primary school receives £3,396. Resources are not reaching front-line public services in Shropshire.

We hear that, instead of being 6.1 per cent., this year's standard spending assessment increase is only 5.4 per cent. That is another £500,000 to £600,000 that the people of Shropshire will not get and were expecting. Amazingly, the fire brigade is 47 per cent. underfunded. It bought no new fire engines in 1998. It is struggling to see how it will afford to buy any more this year, with one pump costing £130,000. Resources are not reaching front-line services, such as the fire brigade.

[Mr. Owen Paterson]

West Mercia—this affects my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff)—has the lowest net expenditure per 1,000 of population in the shire counties. To reach the average, it would need an increase of £14.3 million. To reach the highest level, it would need a £55.3 million increase. It is clear that resources are not reaching front-line services, such as policing in West Mercia.

Sixty-seven per cent. of people in Shropshire drive to work in a car and 97 per cent. of goods go by motorised lorry. There is a £100 million backlog on the roads.

Mr. Tyrie: I wondered whether you had had any notification of that. Has there been any accountability to you, or to local people about those changes?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he must use the correct parliamentary language.

Mr. Tyrie: Has there been any accountability to my hon. Friend about the lack of resources?

Mr. Paterson: No. Those are arbitrary decisions by a central Government dominated by urban interests. They ignore national interests, too. Major road schemes are a constant battle because the Government have an in-built prejudice against the motorised vehicle.

In the light of the figures that I have mentioned, it is staggering to see what has happened to the cost of running Government Departments. In 1997-98, the cost was £13,246 million. It rose by an amazing £1,104 million in 1998-99. That would provide 11 district hospitals, probably 110,000 hip operations at today's figures, over 60,000 E grade nurses and 36,000 junior doctors. Those are striking figures for the general public to ponder when they think of the crisis in health and in Government services elsewhere.

Where is that money going? Before Christmas, I tabled a written question to the Minister for the Cabinet Office and it is already out of date. I asked how many special advisers there were. I was told that there were 68, but an addendum to the written answer gave another six. My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) has managed to elicit information showing that the number has been ratcheted up to 77. They are also not cheap, those boys. Moreover, the bill has increased from £1.8 million in 1996–97, to an estimated £3.9 million in 1999–2000. They also spent £500,000 on jollies abroad.

Taxpayers in Shropshire wonder what they are getting out of those special advisers. What have they got out of the antics of Alastair Campbell, who is paid by the taxpayer a cool £93,562 annually? This week, his service was to tent-peg into the ground a real expert—and member of the Labour party—who understands health problems and was promoted to the Lords for his expertise in health matters.

What did Lord Winston say before he had his talk with Alastair Campbell? In the *New Statesman*, he said:

"There are fewer IVF treatment cycles under this Government than there were under the Tories . . . One could not be anything but unhappy about that. There is a lot wrong with the Health Service and no one is prepared to say so . . . It's just gradually deteriorating because we blame everything on the previous Government."

After Lord Winston received a wet sandbag behind his right ear, he said:

"I certainly do not believe . . . that the NHS is worse under this Government than the last Government."

In the *New Statesman*, Lord Winston said:

"Our reorganisation of the Health Service was very bad. We have made medical care deeply unsatisfactory for a lot of people. We've always had this right, but monolithic view, that there should be equality throughout at the point of delivery. All very good stuff, but it isn't working."

After Lord Winston's interview with Alastair Campbell, he said:

"I believe that the basic direction of NHS policy is right under this Government and in primary health care there have been considerable improvements. We now need to see these in hospitals and specialist services in particular."

It is a real disservice to the British people that Alastair should be paid more than £90,000 annually to distort entirely the debate on health. Lord Winston is a real expert and has genuine points to make on a matter of national interest that affects every citizen, but taxpayers' money has been spent to shut him up. He has gone to ground, and we have not heard from him since. It is disgraceful.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) endorsed that view. On 14 January, in *The Scotsman*, he bravely said:

"Special Advisers have become an abomination. They cause little but sickness in the body politic. They intrigue and chatter, causing misunderstandings about policy . . . I just do not think that those who engage in this kind of activity should be paid for by the taxpayer."

I heartily endorse that view.

Politicisation of the civil service has become particularly apparent in relation to Government information officers. Why, since the 1997 general election, have 16 of the 18 most senior press officers been either removed, moved sideways or pensioned off? Perhaps it is worth listening to the words of Mr. Andy Wood, who was replaced as director of information at the Northern Ireland Office. He said:

"At principal and senior information officer level, discontent with the increasingly politicised atmosphere in which they have to work is running at a high rate."

What about task forces? In November 1999, a report conducted by Democratic Audit—an independent research group at the university of Essex—was published. It identified 318 task forces, on which 2,500 appointees sit. What do the task forces do? They review. Subsequently, the Government received bad press for having too many reviews—so we had a review of reviews, resulting in a ban on reviews. I suspect that, at the next stage, we may progress to a review of bans and that, subsequently, we may come full circle and have a ban on bans. One really wonders where that money is going and what it is achieving.

We should also examine expenditure on devolution. We now have 359 more elected politicians and are spending £120 million more on the cost of elected representatives. Before the referendum, in the White Paper, the Scottish people were told that their Parliament would cost them £50 million. On the latest estimate, however, the building alone will cost £109 million.

We should again ask the West Lothian question, which has been much publicised in the press: why should decisions on the roads and health of the people of

Shropshire be made by hon. Members from north of the border, whereas I have no say there? There is no equity in the arrangement, and it cannot last.

The same is true of the Welsh Assembly, which has more impact on my constituents. Its costs are running at £15 million to £20 million. The cost of the temporary and permanent accommodation is estimated at £17 million to £20 million. However, the situation could get worse because, amazingly, the building that has been designed is too big for the plot available. There could be yet more cost for the benighted British taxpayer. The organisation is also inefficient. The Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, of which I am a member, has great trouble in getting the Welsh Assembly to answer letters even to set up meetings.

There are other outrageous costs that have upset my constituents, particularly in the farming sector, which has taken a hammering under this Government. Farm incomes were at record levels under the last Government, but they have now plummeted. Pig farms are closing every week and milk prices are at rock bottom. What did my farmers think when the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), the previous Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, spent £930,000 relocating MAFF offices and making extravagant trips on Concorde? There is real arrogance in the Government. They must learn that 1 May 1997 did not settle history for good.

The Government also spend huge amounts on publicity. The amount spent by Government Departments on opinion poll research, media advertising, direct mail publicity, press releases, websites and extra publicity totals an astonishing £107,184,624. A lot of that is spent very badly. I shall give just one example that annoyed my local farmers. When the British cattle movement service helpline was set up, 109,000 leaflets were issued, of which 50 per cent. contained errors in the address. A letter of apology then had to be issued to livestock farmers. The total cost of the apologies was £45,000. There is not time to give further examples.

The Labour Government set out with high hopes and an excessive belief in their ability to deliver good. They are failing, and many people resent the extraordinary increase in the cost of central Government, which is not benefiting them in their everyday lives. I support the motion.

9.7 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) expressed concern about the relevance of Committees and even debates on the Floor of the House at the moment. I understand his worry, but the quality of the official Opposition is so poor that it is no wonder there is a problem. The debate has illustrated that in spades.

I was going to refer to the role of special advisers, but my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) was so eloquent on the subject that I shall not develop the argument. I have known him for longer than anyone who was listening to him—with one right honourable exception, who was sitting in the corner like a cat at the cream, justifiably proud of my hon. Friend's speech. In all the time I have known my hon. Friend as a special adviser, I do not remember him ever straying from the lines that were developed in the contracts that were rightly in place before he came to the job.

Mr. Letwin: I should like to give the hon. Gentleman an opportunity to adjust something that he has said. Does he not think it odd that he attributes only to the—no doubt existing—failings of the Opposition the lack of willingness of Ministers to adjust in Committee, given that we are currently witnessing repeated ministerial resistance to efforts in Standing Committee on the part of the Public Accounts Committee—including the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) who leads for the Labour party on the PAC, and other Labour Members, as well as the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives—to establish a national accounts commission to settle accounts independently and to enable the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit them by enforcement? Is not that proof that he is wrong and that the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) was right?

Mr. Miller: If the hon. Gentleman has an axe to grind about the Public Accounts Committee, I suggest that he keep it with the PAC. I was just about to praise the decision of one of his right hon. Friends—the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), who set up the Government's central IT unit. When he did so, I said that it was an impossible function and that it was not going to work. There was not the political will, because of the lack of co-ordination on the part of Ministers in that failing Cabinet, to make that central IT unit develop and flourish, as it has done under this Government. There was no willingness to embrace the kind of change to which I shall refer.

I want to concentrate my remarks on a phrase in the amendment, referring to the role of Government in the context of the "Modernising Government agenda". The legacy of the structures and systems over which the previous Administration presided is in many areas the difficulty, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd) gave a good example. When we were in opposition, the Tories told us time and again that they knew how to run businesses. If that is how they run businesses, God help British business.

The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire was emphasised time and again in research that I did in the period leading up to the publication of the White Paper "Modernising Government". On page 25 of the White Paper, a chart illustrates the number of organisations a person needing long-term care may have to deal with. It is a terrifying list—the whole page shows a complex chart. That is the case time and again when we look at key life events.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham) introduced the White Paper, the phrase "life events" was ridiculed by Opposition Members. They may shake their heads, but it is recorded in *Hansard*. That part of the White Paper was regarded as trivial, but it is not—it is a central area on which we must concentrate.

I looked in detail at the example of the number of organisations that a person has to deal with following a death in the family. Someone came up with the record number of 23. That is absurd. When one is dealing with something that is so painful and personal, one finds that one must deal with people in the hospital and with the

[Mr. Miller]

doctor who issues a death certificate. One is then wandering in a paper maze, trying to find out what to do when one is least well-equipped to deal with it. That is the kind of administrative nightmare that we must unravel in developing the modernisation of our Government.

The philosophy must be based on better service to the customer. There is no doubt that public service needs to be reformed and modernised. Again, the word "modernised" is often ridiculed by Opposition Members. I would remind them of a paper placed in the Library on 15 December—the report to the Prime Minister from Sir Richard Wilson, the head of the home civil service. Under the heading "civil service reform", Sir Richard makes it clear that, in the autumn, at Sunningdale, the permanent heads of the main departments who make up his management board pledged themselves personally to drive forward a new agenda of civil service reform, both corporately and in modernising Government. I am certain that the Opposition would not suggest that Sir Richard Wilson was exceeding his brief by using words such as modernisation, which they ridicule time and again. I genuinely commend that document to the Opposition. I invite them to remember that we are here to deliver services to citizens, and our task is to improve those delivery mechanisms from the shambles that we inherited.

9.15 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Everybody accepts that Governments of all hues are less accountable to the House than they used to be. I do not think that there are any takers for any other view. The health announcement that the Prime Minister made on the Frost programme is a reflection of that—it was the biggest single spending commitment of this Parliament and it was made on a television programme at 9 o'clock on a Sunday morning, instead of to the House of Commons. That would have been inconceivable 20, or even 10, years ago.

We are living in an age in which Parliament is increasingly bypassed. The press do not get their information from watching our proceedings: they go directly to civil servants whom they hope will leak them information or they talk to Ministers who definitely leak them information. The public do not watch our proceedings much: they watch their elected representatives performing on television in interviews. There has been a steady erosion of the importance and relevance of the House of Commons in British public life, as I am sure the father of the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) would wholeheartedly agree.

The Prime Minister almost wholly controls the House of Commons and he is in the process of ensuring that he can put his placemen into the other half of Parliament. That is mostly what the reform of the House of Lords is about. A group of people who had no logical right to be there—the hereditary peers—but who were at least independent, have been removed and are being replaced by appointed representatives, a disproportionate number of whom are from the Labour party. Some 195 life peers have been appointed by the Prime Minister, which is fast approaching as many in two and a half years as the Conservative Administrations between 1979 and 1997 appointed in 18 years.

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that for every 10 of Tony's cronies in the House of Lords, there are four of Charlie's plants and 12 of little Willie's silly billies?

Mr. Tyrie: That does not merit a response.

We must ask what other ways there are to hold Prime Ministers to account. Prime Ministers have, from time to time, dominated the House of Commons, but even then some checks on them have operated. Prime Ministers have historically been accountable to the Cabinet. Even Margaret Thatcher in her strongest moments was accountable to a small group in the Cabinet and she never really succeeded in ruling alone. *[Laughter.]* Those who laugh at that idea have little knowledge of the inside workings of the Thatcher Administration in the mid-1980s. If they care to read the memoirs of Lord Howe or Lord Lawson, they will see that what I am saying is accurate. Indeed, it is one of the reasons behind her fall.

This Prime Minister is accountable to nobody in Government. The Cabinet has become virtually a rubber stamp. Historically, Prime Ministers have generally also been held accountable to some degree by the internal party democracy from which they sprang. However, I doubt whether the parliamentary Labour party acts as an effective check on the Prime Minister. I wonder whether the party's national executive council has any teeth. Labour Members may tell me differently and be able to recount occasions when they have knocked the Prime Minister off course and caused him to listen carefully to all their utterances. However, I do not see Labour Members rushing to give me examples of events. I do not think they have taken place.

The Prime Minister has more or less abandoned all pretence at dispersing power in his party, in Cabinet or to Parliament. He talks openly about the need for a strong centre.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is understandable for a new Prime Minister and his party to believe their rhetoric at the beginning of a period of office? In such circumstances, is not it likely that the party will allow that Prime Minister more latitude than when the rhetoric turns out not to be convincing?

Mr. Tyrie: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I agree.

The Prime Minister has appointed a coterie in No. 10 to ensure that the strong centre can become meaningful. That is why 25 advisers sit in No. 10 Downing street, compared with the five or six that Margaret Thatcher had, and the eight that my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) had.

There has been a sharp increase in the number of advisers throughout Whitehall. The hon. Member for Leeds, Central made a number of interesting points, which I shall address in turn. Although I disagree with it, his speech was one of the most perceptive and thoughtful to be made by a Labour Member tonight.

It is worth reminding the House of the facts. Margaret Thatcher began with seven advisers. When she left office, there were about 20 of them. My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon inherited that number, and there were 38 when he left office. This Prime Minister began with 53 advisers. After nine months, there were 67, and now there are 77. The numbers are rising steadily, and the ratchet effect is inevitable.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office said that the Prime Minister's pledge of an initial cost envelope of £1.8 million would be adhered to. That is nonsense: by November 1997, the cost envelope had risen to £2.6 million, and it now stands at £4 million. That excludes some pension costs and all secretarial support and office costs. To comply with the Prime Minister's 1997 pledge, there will either have to be mass sackings, or all the advisers will have to take a pay cut. I do not know how the target of £1.8 million will be adhered to. Something pretty drastic would have to happen, but of course the Prime Minister is not going to ask for anything of the sort.

Advisers have a legitimate role. I strongly support the introduction of outside advice into Whitehall. However, it is not acceptable for the massive increase in the number of advisers to be accompanied by a reorientation towards highly party political work. Of course there was a party political aspect to being a special adviser when I was in Whitehall but, according to anecdotal accounts from people in the civil service with whom I used to work, that element has increased dramatically. Those accounts are also supported by evidence given to the Select Committee on Public Administration when it investigated the Government information service some time ago.

Incidentally, the Minister said that civil servants had not complained about that trend. In fact, they have complained a great deal, and some—especially those who have left the service—have been prepared to go public. I have no time to read all the evidence, but I urge the Minister to study the evidence from Mr. Steve Reardon. He said that advisers

"blurred management lines and proper demarcation lines . . . and served to put considerable strains on the relationships between private offices, ministers and the press secretary which had not previously existed."

He added that the relationship with the special advisers was difficult. Numerous other former civil servants are prepared to attest to those difficulties.

The problem is that there is no clear demarcation line to limit party political work. That is why I wrote to Lord Neill with several recommendations. The first was that there should be a cap on the number of advisers. The second was that there should be a code of conduct creating that demarcation line. The third was that Permanent Secretaries should be given the power of, and responsibility for, enforcing contracts and the code of conduct. I am very pleased that Lord Neill appears to have accepted all three recommendations.

We could go down a different route for our civil service. The American system, for example, has hundreds of appointees. France has the Cabinet system, putting a few key people into private offices and turning them into Cabinets. That answers the question of the hon. Member for Leeds, Central; he asked how 70 people can take on thousands of civil servants. It is not the numbers that count—indeed, the hon. Gentleman said so elsewhere in his speech. What counts is whether those people are in key positions to enable them effectively to take over part of the work formerly undertaken by civil servants. We will be moving towards that once the special adviser numbers increase to the extent that they have small teams operating in private offices.

We must put a stop to the growth in advisers. We are seeing the creation of what amounts to a campaign team for the re-election of the Labour party, working in Whitehall and paid for by the taxpayer. That is wholly unacceptable.

9.27 pm

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): I have had the privilege of listening to all the debate this evening. Although I admit to being pretty disappointed by some of the contributions, I strongly support others.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) called for transparency in government and the need for a reform on spending. He said that his Administration had had a grip on administrative costs, and that they had sought to hold executives to account. I presume that they thought that the most effective way of doing that was to cut the number of civil servants by a third.

I was disappointed, to say the least, at the hon. Gentleman's contribution, and at those of the hon. Members for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) and for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff). The hon. Member for Mid-Worcestershire descended into a flash flood of emotion and, as we know, flash floods wreck and do not build. I suppose that wrecking and building were characteristics of the previous Administration.

I want to talk about something far more significant than the appointment of 70 advisers—namely, what the Government have done for business. They have sought to put in place the structures and processes to make legislation far more effective for business. They want to be accountable to this income-generating activity on which we all depend.

The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) has already said that legislation had previously received some pre-legislative scrutiny. That is simply not adequate when we consider the mass of legislation affecting the business community that the previous Administration brought before the House.

As a business person at the time, I perceived the legislation as being introduced without review of what went before. I received multiple diktats from the same Department in one week. It was evident that the right hand never understood, or even knew, what the left hand was doing. That led to a great deal of frustration and confusion. At no time did anybody ask me for my opinion. I wrote to many individuals in numerous Departments trying to explain the daily difficulties that I faced as a direct consequence of their activity—and I am still waiting for a response.

It was with pleasure that I noted that on coming to power, the Government immediately established the regulatory impact unit. It is not a glamorous unit, but it seeks to do what most businesses want the Government to do—to scrutinise each piece of legislation with regard to its impact on business. That is to be welcomed. It requires Departments to do something that they have

[Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas]

never done before. Guidelines have been produced to help them execute this task. They were desperately needed, as each Department decided what was appropriate in the light of its own guidelines, so the effectiveness of each Department could not be compared and contrasted. Some hon. Members will have noticed that legislation is now accompanied by a regulatory impact assessment, a vital document that has arisen not as a consequence of civil service input, but as a direct result of communication and consultation with the groups affected by Bills.

We heard a lot about deregulation and red tape under the previous Administration, who set great store by what they were sweeping away. Let me put their efforts into context. Much to the relief of the business community, the Conservative Government enacted the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994. That was supposed to make great changes for the business community, but it did not.

Since 1994, the number of orders pursued as a result of the Act is 46. The business community, at a conservative estimate, has an annual turnover of £1 million billion, but over the past three years the reduction resulting from the Act has been £120 million. That does not make a great deal of difference to business. We have tinkered at the edges rather than achieving fundamental root-and-branch re-evaluation of regulations that we expect businesses to continue to follow long after they have ceased to be effective or competitive.

I welcome the inclusion in the Queen's Speech of a regulatory reform Bill, which will impact both on business and on public sector Departments. That represents a major and welcome shift in scrutiny. Significant sums go to the public sector, and we need to move from legislation that is no longer effective and constrains the public sector towards meaningful legislation that will enhance activity.

Finally, the previous Government may have been accountable, but by conducting a crusade against administration, they removed the structures by which they might have listened to the people they purported to serve. They served themselves; we accept that communication costs money while seeking to be an effective and accountable Government.

9.32 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): We have heard much interesting discourse this evening. Alas, the Chamber has not been very full, although the subjects under discussion are almost as important as those that attracted a larger audience earlier.

Our starting point was costs. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) spoke eloquently about the £1 billion a year more that is being spent on the apparatus of government. The Minister for the Cabinet Office sought to make light of that figure, saying that it took no account of inflation. One could almost hear Sir Humphrey telling her so. Alas, on accrued calculation, the increase between 1997–98 and 1999–2000 exceeds the rate of inflation by about £500 million. That is a significant real-terms increase.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) was keen to point out the contrast between that increase and what the Government spend in his constituency, where the costs of publicity have risen faster than the amounts spent on the ground. We turned next to special advisers and information officers, and my hon. Friend raised the role of Alastair Campbell and the notorious silencing of Lord Winston—now to be known as the silencing of the lamb.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), who has made a notable contribution on the question of special advisers, identified a trend that we must admit occurred under previous Governments, but which has been accelerated by the present one. As he pointed out, we are heading remorselessly towards the establishment of campaign teams in Whitehall that serve to extend the principle of elective dictatorship. They give the Prime Minister ever-increasing control. Again, that is not a new phenomenon, but it has been accelerated under the Labour Government.

There has been an increase in the number of special advisers, an increase in political appointments to information positions and an increase in costs. Of course, there is a connection between them—one leads, in small part, to the other.

Other matters are deeper and far more significant. In a remarkable speech, the hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) said something that is of the greatest possible significance to the House. There were moments when, from his intonation, I thought that I was listening to his father, the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). Alas, there were not moments when, from the contents of his remarks, I thought that I was listening to the right hon. Gentleman on the subject of the protection of the House and its prerogative.

The hon. Member for Leeds, Central told us that he celebrated the great virtuosity with which the Government have used the machinery of government to achieve their ends—that was the broad gist of his remarks. He is right—unqualifiably right. The Government have shown great virtuosity in using the machinery of government to achieve their own ends. The problem is what my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) described. The end that the Government have in mind is not merely that of governing—no reason why they should not use the machine to achieve that—but much more: they are determined to use government as a means of remaining in government. That notorious annual report is the supreme example of that.

When the Minister for the Cabinet Office replied to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire, she made light of all that. She said that there were no real complaints from civil servants: no one thought that there had been any serious politicisation of the civil service—no, no, nothing of the kind. I draw her attention to the statement that, at principal and senior information officer level, discontent with the increasingly politicised atmosphere in which those officers have to work is running at a high rate. Who said that? Was it some Conservative spokesman? Was it somebody who had nothing to with the right hon. Lady? No, it was Mr. Andy Wood, the director of information during her tenure at the Northern Ireland Office. She knows whereof she speaks, because she has been one of its prime exponents.

According to the right hon. Lady's information officer, she has helped to ensure that the Government's brilliant performance—we have to grant them that—has been better than that of any previous Government at using the machinery of government to achieve their own ends. The hon. Member for Leeds, Central also pointed that out. The

Government have attacked the Opposition. If possible, they have obliterated the Opposition through big tentery—the use and manipulation of the media—as never before and never so brilliantly. They have made an effort to use the fact of being in power to remain in power.

I emphasise that fact, because it is a remarkable attack not only on the Opposition and on the civil service, but on our constitution. Above all, our constitution depends on the fact that the people who gain power do not use it to remain in power. The cardinal feature of a democratic constitution is that those who find themselves the tenants of power cannot abuse that power to obliterate democracy thereafter.

The situation in this country is strange. We do not have a written constitution of the kind for which the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) calls. There is nothing to govern the activity of our Government or our politicians—nothing but the procedures of the House and our ability to interrogate and to hold to account. The sad truth is that, because under its procedures the House is run by the majority that is run by the Government, we cannot hold Governments to account unless they are governed by the procedure and the convention enshrined in the civil service.

Our civil service is not just a set of servants of the Government of the day. They are the servants of the Crown and the state in the profound sense that they are there to enshrine proper procedure and to protect the veracity of the information flowing from Government to the populace so that we in this place can hold Government to account and can argue the truth about facts and debate policies. If the Government use the civil service, politicise it, surround it with campaign teams, put in special advisers and make sure that it turns its attention to producing annual reports that are mere examples of self-congratulation, they will begin to undermine the constitutional foundations of our democracy.

Mr. Rowe: My hon. Friend is making a remarkably powerful speech and I entirely agree with him. It is in the nature of party politics that parties do their utmost to remain in power. However, the Labour party, which is now in government, expects the taxpayer to pay for what used to be a charge on a political party. Is that process not part of an undesirable atrophy of the political parties in this country?

Mr. Letwin: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Government seek to use the taxpayer for their own party political ends. He is right to say that it is legitimate for a political party to seek to remain in power and that it is wrong for it to use taxpayers' funds—£1 billion more of them—to achieve that aim. Above all, it is wrong for a Government to use the civil service in that way. That undermines the civil service as the guardian of our constitution and undermines the ability of this place to hold the Government to account. In the end, that is what counts most.

If I had to trade that £1 billion—or several billion more—and the special advisers across Whitehall who do the Prime Minister's bidding for the sovereign integrity of the civil service as the guarantor of the veracity of Government information and the procedures that enable us to hold them to account, I would do the trade. The Government do not offer us that trade. They offer us expense, the addition of advisers everywhere, the campaign teams and finally the corruption of the politicisation of the civil service, which offers an end to our constitutional integrity. That is the charge, and I hope it sticks.

9.43 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Mr. Ian McCartney): Before I respond to the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) and for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), may I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn), for South Derbyshire (Mr. Todd), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) and for Wigan (Mr. Turner) for their speeches and interventions? The special mixture of integrity and knowledge of the subject that they showed bodes well for future Labour Front-Bench teams in government when I hope to be collecting my zimmer from the Cabinet Office. On the Government Back Benches is a range of Members who will be able to take the Government forward to their second, third and fourth terms.

I hope that the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) does not take this personally, but, as I listened to him, I almost lost the will to live. He said that, when the Labour party was in opposition, it had policy reviews, but no commitments. What about the new deal and the national minimum wage for more than 2 million people and what about linking the new deal with economic stability to provide 600,000 new jobs, more than halve youth unemployment and halve long-term unemployment? We have reformed the criminal justice system by providing more than £19 billion to help and put £21 billion into education with more to come. We have put billions into urban regeneration and social housing, and provided more rights for consumers and for workers, who have the social chapter and the right to paid holidays for the first time.

However, I make an apology to the hon. Gentleman. We made no mention before the election of the introduction of the working families tax credit, which is the biggest boon to cutting family poverty in Britain this century. We did not mention the record increase in child benefit or the introduction of a minimum income guarantee for pensioners. I apologise for that, but pensioners, mothers and working families with the working families tax credit do not want us to apologise. They say, "Thank God we elected a Labour Government in 1997".

I turn now to the speeches by the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire and for West Dorset. They demonstrated the three phases that the Tories have gone through since their landslide defeat. The first phase is the one in which Tories said, "I can't believe it. I've lost the ministerial car and the special advisers." However, I see that some of those advisers have washed up on the Tory Back Benches. Some former Tory Members got their P45 from their constituents and had to apply for a proper job for the first time in 18 years.

The second phase was denial. The Tories told themselves that they had done nothing wrong except perhaps that they had not been extreme enough, right-wing enough or Conservative enough. They invented a world in which there was no Tory sleaze, no incompetence and no favours for friends.

[Mr. Ian McCartney]

Tonight, they have entered the third phase, which I call the brass neck phase. During this phase they are brazening it out and trying to give the impression that all they left us was a golden legacy. What a legacy. *[Interruption.]* Hold on a minute, lads. When we came to power in 1997, 40 per cent. of the largest quangos were chaired by Tory party members or people who had donated to Tory party funds. Those people, mainly men, were responsible for dispensing billions of pounds of public funds. They had been appointed for the sole reason that they were Tory party activists or had donated to the slush funds that the Tories have yet to open up to public scrutiny.

Mr. Letwin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McCartney: No, I gave up ten minutes of the time for my wind-up speech so that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues could speak, although they did not make the best use of their time.

Sir Donald Wilson, the former president of Chester Conservative Association—Chester was a Labour gain at the last election—was appointed chairman of the West Midlands regional health authority. He made a complete mess of that, but was he sacked? No, unfortunately, he was transferred to run my health authority, the North West regional health authority. Sir Bryan Askew, a defeated Tory candidate in Penistone and in York, was given a job running the Yorkshire health authority.

Did Lord Crickhowell, a defeated Tory MP and ex-Cabinet Minister, go on the dole? No, he was paid £51,000 to run the National Rivers Authority. Michael Pickard became chairman of the London Docklands development corporation. He got that job for the simple reason that he founded the chain of Happy Eater restaurants, which are the favourite eating establishments of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). The Tories really investigated the credentials of people they put in charge of public funds. David Plastow ran the Medical Research Council for the simple reason that his company consistently donated to the Tory party.

When Mrs. Thatcher came to power, she promised to abolish quangos. By 1992, she had increased their budget from £13.9 billion to £42 billion—a sum equivalent to a fifth of the entire national expenditure and more than the total sum that we spend on local government. There was no consistency of policy on appointments.

Mr. Letwin: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McCartney: No. The hon. Gentleman should listen because he is not facing reality, and I have to bring him back to reality.

When the Tories ran out of business men they moved on to politicians and those who had been defeated at the polls. In 1991, the Welsh Secretary was responsible for appointments to 81 public bodies, with the Welsh Office having powers directly to appoint 1,261 people to them.

The Welsh Secretary appointed Ian Grist, a former Tory Minister, to head the South Glamorgan health authority. He was defeated by his constituents but given a job by the Tories. The secretary to Gwilym Jones, another Welsh Office Minister, was also appointed to the South Glamorgan health authority. Jeff Sainsbury, a former Tory councillor, was put in charge of the Cardiff Bay development corporation. Phil Pedley, a defeated Tory candidate, was put in charge of the Board of Housing for Wales, succeeding another failed Tory candidate.

When the Tories ran out of failed politicians, they turned to the Conservative party's national union executive. Of its 200 members, we have identified at least 37 who landed jobs in the public sector, including the party treasurer Charles Hambro, Sir Basil Feldman, Sir Philip Harris, Sir Robert Balchin and Beata Brookes.

Mr. Letwin: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman has given way, and I am most grateful to him. I wonder whether, in the light of that marvellous tirade, he could answer a simple question. Will he guarantee that the Government will apply Nolan rules to the appointment of members of task forces?

Mr. McCartney: The Government are not only applying Nolan rules but extending accountability across the appointments system. The Government have applied the accountability rules to all appointments to quangos, which meant 6,000 more appointments. This is the first Government to have tenants on task forces talking about their housing conditions. The Tories put construction director bosses on to quangos and we are putting on to them members of residents' and tenants' associations.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. McCartney: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman later.

When the Tories ran out of members for the national union executive, they called in the Tory praetorian guard, their wives. That was the next group to be given public appointments. There was Lady Elspeth Howe, the then Deputy Prime Minister's wife, Anne, and Lady Brittan, wife of Sir Leon Brittan. As for Mary Archer, I wonder whether she had an opportunity to persuade us that she had more abilities than her husband. There was Lady Ann Parkinson, wife of Lord Parkinson. In addition, there was Lady June Onslow, wife of Sir Cranslow Onslow.

Mr. Luff: Get it right.

Mr. McCartney: The hon. Gentleman may have a go at my accent but I have more integrity in my little finger than there is in the whole of the Tory party. It does not matter if the gentleman is called Cranslow Onslow or Cranley Onslow. The fact is that the Tories gave his wife a job without consulting the public. There was then Arabella Lennox-Boyd, wife of a former Foreign Office Minister, Mark Lennox-Boyd.

When the Tories had fixed jobs for their friends and their families they started fixing things for themselves. It was the greatest folly of the previous Conservative Government. There was Tim Smith, who was forced to stand down as the Member for Beaconsfield because he involved himself in cash-for-questions. Neil Hamilton was defeated in Tatton—I thought that that would silence Conservative Members—after resigning as a Minister because of his involvement in cash for questions. Graham Riddick was defeated in Colne Valley. He also accepted cash for questions. The hon. Member for Bosworth

(Mr. Tredinnick) was criticised for agreeing to accept £1,000 in return for tabling questions. Jonathan Aitken was defeated in South Thanet after being forced to resign as a Minister following revelations that he had stayed at the Ritz, courtesy of middle east arms dealers.

Sir Andrew Bowden was another Member linked to Greer. He was used to lobby and to recruit other Tory Members to lobby for him. Angela Rumbold, the former Deputy Chairman of the Tory party, was defeated in Mitcham and Malden. She arranged meetings with Ministers for lobbying companies. William Waldegrave was criticised for being involved in misleading the House. Sir Nicholas Lyell was criticised in the arms to Iraq affair. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan)—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister must distinguish carefully between ex-Members and current Members.

Mr. McCartney: I am clearly differentiating between right hon. and hon. Members and I am naming hon. Members who are here and referring to those who were defeated in the general election and their former constituencies. It is important that, in a debate about standards, probity, integrity and open access to government, we set the record straight. I have no intention of allowing Conservatives to get away with their gross incompetence and sleaze during the period of the Conservative Government.

Mr. Brady: I am sure that the Minister was about to move to the list of 260 Labour councillors who have been appointed to health trusts—*[Interruption.]* In the light of that, will he give an assurance to the House that if and when the commissioner for public appointments reports that in that scandalous process there has been political bias, those people will be dismissed and that new appointments will be undertaken without political bias?

Mr. McCartney: I am proud that we took the opportunity in government to change the way in which the Tories ran national health service trusts. For the first time, we are giving opportunities to women to be appointed. We are giving opportunities to members of ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and people from the local community, whether they work in the business community, in industry or in the local authority.

The previous Government scarred the capacity of local health trusts to represent the community. In my community, for example, they appointed people who did not even live in that community. Those people were appointed simply because they were members of the Conservative party.

Sir Leonard Peach, the previous Commissioner for Public Appointments, stated in 1998 about appointments to NHS trust boards that

"there was no evidence of Ministers intervening to ensure advancement of their nominees or colleagues"

and that

"patronage on behalf of individuals is clearly not an issue."

That was the position, and the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) does not like the fact that NHS trusts are no longer the bastion of Tory party members appointed—

Mr. Brady *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has indicated that he is not giving way at present. It would be helpful if he could indicate whether he intends to give way or not.

Mr. McCartney: With all due respect, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I am 5 ft 1 in tall, it is sometimes difficult to know whether I am standing or sitting. I gave way to the hon. Gentleman and replied to him. He just does not like the reply.

The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who is present, was criticised for using the right-to-buy provisions offered by Westminster council to fund the purchase of valuable council-owned property by a friend. That is the level of members of the Tory party, who used the right to buy to advance themselves.

That is the reality of Tory sleaze. No wonder that under the Tories, public confidence in the political process plumbed new depths. Under the Tories, sleaze entered the political dictionary. They left a tainted legacy.

Labour's 1997 manifesto promised to clean up politics in order to rebuild the bond of trust between the British people and government. The Conservatives seem to be opposed to the very idea of accountability in the democratic process. They support hereditary peers, unaccountable quangos and secret government.

We know from the debate this evening—I hope our colleagues in Scotland and Wales realise this—of the Tories' continued opposition to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. They have tried to thwart the Government's determination to improve democracy by devolving government to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions. They have opposed the removal of the rights of hereditary peers, and in the past they resisted universal suffrage and votes for women. There is nothing new in the Tories' opposition to the extension of democracy.

There is a further damning indictment of the Tories. Under their Government, we paid more and got less. They spent billions on the NHS internal market, while there were fewer doctors and nurses, and they privatised the dental service. They introduced the poll tax, which failed and cost the British taxpayer £14 billion. The Tories were the Government of BSE, which cost the British farming community billions of pounds in lost jobs and lost trade.

On Black Wednesday the Tory Government lost £10 billion of British reserves, and they doubled the national debt to £30 billion a year. It took a Labour Government to eliminate that national debt.

What about Steven Norris, the Tory candidate for London mayor? As Minister for Transport in London, in two years he ripped off the British taxpayer with overrun costs of £1.4 billion for the Jubilee line extension, yet he

[Mr. McCartney]

wants to be mayor of London. It was a case not of "catch a tube", but of "get on your bike".

The Tories cannot even add up. The right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) said that central bureaucracy costs £1.1 billion, but he adjusted that the following day. No wonder he cannot get his figures right. His financial adviser is Michael Ashcroft, a resident of Belize and the man who bought the Tory party lock, stock and barrel.

There is no disguising the fact that the Government have introduced greater accountability. More real people serve on quangos, instead of Tory place men and women. People are appointed on merit, not as favours. We have ended the secrecy about appointments. We have stopped ministerial patronage. We have slammed the door on the political scandals of the last two years of Tory rule. The Tories have learned nothing. I urge the House to reject their motion and support the Government.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 179, Noes 331.

Division No. 31] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forsythe, Clifford
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin

Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

DAMAGED ORIGINAL

The House divided: Ayes 327, Noes 162.

Division No. 32] **[10.16 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWilliam, John
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stringer, Graham

Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. Mike Hall.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Collins, Tim
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. John Randall.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House notes that, compared to the previous administration, the costs of central Government have not risen in real terms, and have indeed fallen; supports the progress made by this Government in cleaning up politics and rebuilding the bond of trust with the British people, broken through the failures of the previous administration; welcomes the Government's actions to improve democratic accountability; endorses the inclusive approach to policymaking of the Modernising Government agenda, which involves more people from all walks of life; welcomes the improvement in standards in public life; and agrees with the Sixth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life that 'special advisers have a valuable role to play.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Motion on the Line of Route may be proceeded with, though opposed, until 11.30 p.m.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

Line of Route

10.30 pm

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): I beg to move,

That this House approves the First Report from the Administration Committee on the Revised Framework for Re-opening the Line of Route during the Summer Adjournment (HC98).

I have to admit to a distinct feeling of déjà vu as I move a motion to approve an Administration Committee report on the Line of Route. On 26 May last year, the House was unable to approve the Committee's original proposals, and we were asked to come forward with an alternative framework.

I am grateful for the determination shown by my colleagues on the Committee, by the former Serjeant at Arms and the director of finance and administration and their staff, and by the consultants. That has enabled us to advance our new proposals—assuming that this House and the other place agree to them—in time for a re-opening this year.

As the House may have heard, Mr. Walker, the director of finance, has been ill and recently underwent a major operation. May I take this opportunity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to express to him the Committee's best wishes for a speedy and a complete recovery? [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I thank the Leader of the House for making time available for this debate.

I have to advise the House that there is a printing error in the report that could cause confusion. In paragraph 27, the correct financial year is 2000–01.

In drafting our new proposals, the Committee took on board comments made during the debate last year, especially those made by the hon. Members for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), for Burnley (Mr. Pike) and for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). We have listened to the concerns that have been raised, and I hope that hon. Members will agree that we have acted accordingly in response to the wish expressed by the House.

Bearing in mind that any tour of the Palace has to be of a suitable and dignified nature, the Committee has produced proposals that we consider are as limited—and involve as small an investment—as possible. I shall be brief, as time is short and I do not wish to deprive Members of an opportunity to speak. I wish to highlight a few points, particularly those about which the House expressed most concern last year.

As we say in the report, in the previous debate,

"no objections were raised to the principle of a re-opening"

provided that it was done on an experimental basis. The House objected to introducing an admission charge to visit the Palace. We do not now propose such a charge. Visitors will still have to pay—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Oh!

Mrs. Roe: I accept that some right hon. and hon. Members may say that I am being pedantic, but there is a crucial difference. Visitors will be paying not to visit the Houses of Parliament, but for the services of a guide.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): One of the things that troubles a number of hon. Members is that it is hard to see why members of the public should have to make a prior arrangement to come here at a particular time. It is difficult to see why, as with cathedrals and many other public places, they should not simply come to this place as and when they choose during the recess. Why on earth should they have a guide? I, for one, much prefer to go around public places by myself.

Mrs. Roe: Members of the public can come to the House of Commons through their Member of Parliament, as now. They do not need to have a guide. In fact, their Member of Parliament can obtain tickets for them and they can come through the House in the usual way without a guide. Obviously, Members of Parliament can show people round the House themselves, or get a member of staff or spouse to do it for them. However, it was assumed by the Committee that most people who visited during the summer recess would be tourists, and we expected that they would prefer to have a guide. That is why that facility will be available. After we had considered the approach taken by other historic places of interest in London—Buckingham palace, for example—we felt that the proposals were the best way to cope with the numbers that we anticipated would wish to see the Palace. If we have timed and booked visits, there will be no confusion and no difficulty for hon. Members.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): I echo my hon. Friend's comments about the Committee, which struggled with the issues that the House gave us to consider. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would do me the courtesy of listening to my remarks. With the present arrangements, we have a Line of Route because it is right to have some management and supervision—for safety and security reasons—of visitors to the Palace of Westminster. The necessity for some supervision, security and safety means that people should not be allowed to wander unaided around this important building.

Mrs. Roe: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments, which I endorse. The Palace is not a museum with treasures in glass cases or areas cordoned off. It is a workplace, and it is therefore important that groups of visitors are properly supervised. The security arrangements are also important.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Will the hon. Lady make it clear that during August and September it will still be possible for a Member of Parliament or a member of staff to take round a small group without making any payment?

Mrs. Roe: I confirm that that will be the case, as it is now. In August, that facility is available on Wednesday and Thursday mornings and in September, on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings. On those mornings, Members of Parliament will not be inhibited in any way from taking constituents, friends or whoever they like around the House, because nothing has changed. The new proposals are for an additional facility and I hope that all right hon. and hon. Members will feel that we have listened to what they said when we put the issue to the House before.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): In the 1960s, there was a free Line of Route. I realise that interest in

Parliament has increased since then, but the proposals will not break entirely new ground and I wonder what arrangements were made in those days. I remember taking the Line of Route from the Victoria tower when the House was not sitting and that the guide was free, although I might have tagged on to another party that had paid.

What comparisons have been made with other Parliaments, such as the French National Assembly, the Bundestag and the Congress of the United States of America? Visits to the White House—I know it is not a legislature—are free—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to continue on those lines.

Mrs. Roe: I am afraid that I did not visit the House in the 1960s but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows that it was the murder of Airey Neave and the consequent security issues that caused the Line of Route visits to be stopped. I do not know the exact arrangements that were made, but I will let him know. I imagine that Members of Parliament could do then what they can do now and that that would have been free. I will come to the arrangements made in other countries later, but in general they are all different. I said that there would be no admission charge, and that is the situation at present. Many people already pay a modest charge—to the doorkeepers, to blue badge guides or to the education unit—to take part in tours along the Line of Route.

I cannot stress too strongly that nothing in our proposals will affect the arrangements that apply during the summer or when the House is sitting. Summer reopening will be an additional facility. It is designed to appeal mainly to those who might be termed casual visitors: tourists who come to London. The proposed arrangements will not affect hon. Members' existing rights of access or the autumn visits programme.

Some hon. Members were concerned, rightly, that a summer opening could affect the annual parliamentary works programme. I hope that the House will be reassured that the Committee was advised—by the director of parliamentary works—that the works plan for summer 2000 can be carried out without significant obstruction to the line of route.

The House will be interested to note that the planned works include repairs to the rail around the Throne in the other place, laser cleaning of the stonework in the passage between the Central Lobby and the Members' Lobby, and the replacement of some acoustic tiles. My personal view is that these works may enhance a visit, rather than detract from it. Visitors will be able to see some of the essential repair work that has to be carried out from time to time in the Palace. In any case, many people enjoy watching others at work. That is why there are often spy holes in the hoardings around building sites.

The nuts and bolts of the proposed operation are set out in detail in paragraphs 17 to 20 of the report. I shall not detain the House by rehearsing them at length now. However, to make a visit to Parliament as enjoyable and efficient as possible, it will be necessary for visitors to book timed tickets and a guide in advance of their visit. The operational day will be divided into a series of admissions slots, with a limit on the numbers admitted in each slot. The proposal is that five groups, each of 20 visitors plus a guide, would be admitted at 15-minute intervals.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the guide charge be higher or lower than the charge currently paid by groups who use the service, or will it be about the same?

Mrs. Roe: Charges vary and, because they are private arrangements between hon. Members and others, they are no concern of mine. I have heard that the charge will be slightly higher, but there is nothing to prevent hon. Members from making arrangements with the people with whom they have arrangements at present, on behalf of their constituents and others. Those arrangements will not be changed in any way. The guide service will be an additional facility.

The arrangements that we propose differ from those in operation in any other Parliament in the world. However, our inquiries show that no two Parliaments operate exactly the same system. Arrangements vary greatly, from strictly required pre-bookings to a policy that amounts to little more than "turn up at any time".

Most Parliaments seem to have guided tours, rather than the auto-guides originally proposed by the Committee, and even then there are differences. In Canada, for example, tours are paid for by the taxpayer, and the guides are members of staff of the Canadian Parliament. In Austria, the tour guides are employees of an outside agency, and visitors pay their admission charge of approximately £2 at a reception desk inside the entrance to the Parliament building.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Is the hon. Lady aware that the Association of Professional Tourist Guides in Britain, which is affiliated to the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union, has strongly welcomed the proposal? It gives the first opportunity for professional guides, trained outside Parliament, to show their skills within Parliament.

Mrs. Roe: I am sure that hon. Members are grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that additional information.

Due to the simpler arrangements being proposed, we are looking at an operation that, although cheaper, still is not cheap. Paragraph 29 of the report states that we could be looking at a bottom-line figure of some £138,000—an amount that has not been allowed for in the 2000-01 estimates. However, should the House of Commons and the House of Lords approve the report, I can confirm that it will not be necessary for a supplementary estimate to be put before the House because it will be able to draw upon its central reserve, which is designed to cover matters such as this.

One important way in which the House could recoup some of its outlay is by the sale of gifts and souvenirs. Merchandising is discussed in paragraphs 21 to 25 of the report. The House will have noted that we had misgivings about the consultants' proposal for letting the contract for merchandising. We consider that before any final decision is taken, the views of the experts must be sought. I refer of course to the two refreshment departments, the Catering

[Mrs. Roe]

Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-East (Mr. Turner), and the Lords refreshment sub-committee.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Is my hon. Friend aware that some of us—perhaps only a minority—believe that a widening of the merchandising franchise to enable more and more people to purchase goods from the House of Commons and the House of Lords devalues such items? They are not quite the rarities that they used to be, and are not so well received, because far more people get them than when Members of Parliament were the main purchasers.

Mrs. Roe: My hon. Friend must know that this matter is in the hands of the Catering Committee, not the Administration Committee. However, we believed it important to consult those who serve on those Committees in both the Lords and the Commons to obtain their views on how best to proceed with merchandising. I am sure that his point will be brought to the attention of the relevant Committee chairman.

We must ensure that we obtain the best possible deal for our constituents—the United Kingdom taxpayers. That will be best achieved by the two refreshment departments providing the gifts and souvenirs, rather than an outside company, particularly as the reopening this summer will be purely experimental.

The Committee thought it only right to sound a note of caution about the new proposals. That is set out in paragraph 15. Perhaps our greatest concern was that as there will not be a set charge, as previously proposed, unscrupulous tour operators may see the Line of Route tours as an opportunity to rip off the visitor and charge considerably in excess of the forecast charge per visitor of £2.50 each for participants in an English-language group or £2.86 each in a foreign-language group. No doubt the House authorities will keep a close eye on that, perhaps using spot checks to ascertain how much individuals are being charged. We felt that we should bring that matter to the House's attention. I must stress that our proposals are experimental and can be reviewed at the end of the experiment.

I hope that the House will accept the report. Some hon. Members prefer last year's report and feel that our original proposals were the best way in which to proceed.

Mr. Forth: No.

Mrs. Roe: I assure my right hon. Friend that some Members feel that way. I accept that others may feel uneasy about handing over the guiding of tours of Parliament to an outside agency, but I urge them to give our proposals a chance. Summer reopening would be a trial, and I acknowledge that there are ifs and buts around our proposals. If any mistake is made, or if visitors are being exploited by tour operators, we shall reconsider matters and put them right before the House is asked to make summer reopening an annual event. The House will make the final decision. The matter will come before us again when the experiment is over. In the hope that it will be supported, I commend the report to the House.

10.51 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): Opening the House of Commons and the House of Lords this summer would be an experiment. This is a House matter, and the Government have no view. No party Whip is being applied. There are many differences of view across the political parties, and we have heard some of them already. When the matter was debated on 26 May last year, there were serious differences of opinion. Since then, the Select Committee on Administration has reflected further and produced new proposals. A great deal of effort has been made over a fairly long time, and I am grateful for the Committee's work.

It is absolutely right that there should be greater public access to an important and historic building that is a symbol across the world. I still get a thrill when I walk through Westminster Hall, soaking up the atmosphere. The hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) outlined how the new proposals differ from the previous proposals, but the rights of Members of both Houses must be protected, and the parliamentary works programme must go forward as planned.

The proposal is experimental, suggesting a trial only during summer 2000. The Committee was clear on that point. Paragraph 32 of the report states that:

"a reopening, Summer 2000 should be seen as a trial, and will be subject to review later that year."

Lessons will be learned from the experiment, and the House will wish to consider whether summer opening can become permanent or whether there might be possibilities of extending public access at other times of the year.

I strongly support the Committee's report, but will highlight a few proposals. First, if the motion is agreed, the relevant Committees in the other place will consider the matter, and the other place will be asked to agree to a parallel motion. Secondly, as with the previous scheme, some input will be required from the public purse, mainly for security costs. The financial contribution will depend on take-up. That is a matter that the Committee has discussed and considered in detail. There could be an annual operating deficit of £232,000—of which the Commons' share would be £138,000. The House needs to bear that in mind when considering the matter.

As has been pointed out, merchandising must be considered. The sale of souvenirs will help to defray the costs. However, we must ensure that those souvenirs are appropriate and that they reflect suitably on the character of the House and of Parliament. The Committee recommended further discussion of that point.

Whatever the souvenirs that people take away, they will also take away important insights into the work of Parliament, and vivid memories and recollections of the building. Without doubt, this place affects and infects people. I shall support the trial opening. I hope that, in due course, it can be further extended.

10.56 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I welcome the work of the Administration Committee and the introductory remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe). I am conscious that, on the previous two occasions when the Committee submitted recommendations to the House—on vellum and on the Line of Route—the House rejected them. I hope that it will be third time lucky.

I was happy with the original proposals, for which I voted on 26 May. Those included a charging structure, which meant that both Houses would recover their costs over five years, based on an average payment per visitor of £5.17, including VAT. That would have enabled the House to meet the other claims on its budget over a five-year period, without having to make provision for reopening the Line of Route.

The new report, which reflects the views of the House in that earlier vote and has overcome the fears of some critics, does not put the proposal in a five-year time frame. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne said, she recommends a trial this summer, followed by a review. I understand the reasons for that, but appendix B of the report shows an annual operating deficit of between £200 and £230,000, because the average charge per visitor has fallen to between £2.50 and £2.80, leaving a subsidy per visitor of £2.80.

On top of that, there are start-up costs—£400,000 in the earlier report. Although the second report knocks out some of those costs, I cannot find in it an estimate of the revised start-up costs. That will be of interest to the House of Commons Commission. There will be budgetary implications. At a time when we are urging financial discipline on other public bodies, we should exercise it ourselves.

The principle that visitors should pay, which I support, has been retained, although it is presented not as an admission fee, but as an apportioned share of the costs of a guide. I prefer the original proposals, but I am happy to support the ones before us.

I wish to raise a few points. Will my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne tell us where the new visitors' office—referred to in paragraph 13—will be?

In the original proposals, the House was, in effect, a retailer; we controlled the purchase price and dealt with the visitors. We are now moving into wholesale mode—somebody else will retail the package. The result could be that visitors would pay the fees to which the House objected last May, but the House would not receive the proceeds. The House could find that the retailer has creamed off the difference. My hon. Friend touched on that point. One needs to keep an eye out to ensure that there is no abuse. I hope that, if we discover abuses and that someone else is creaming off the surplus that should go to the House, we shall reconsider the matter with a view to recouping such surpluses.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Is not it fair to ask the guides to police the system for us?

Sir George Young: I am not sure that even the guides will know how much visitors are paying to tour organisers.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: They can ask.

Sir George Young: Indeed. However, my response to the hon. Gentleman's question is no, it would not be fair to the ask the guides, in addition to their other responsibilities, to police the system.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Is there not a risk that, by contracting out this new guide system, which will be based in a booking office in the garden of the Victoria Tower—at the other end of the Palace—we might drive up the cost of tours with the current guides of the House, for which Members of Parliament pay? My right hon. Friend appears to believe entirely in market forces in respect of current services and provisions in the Palace of Westminster. Am I right?

Sir George Young: In a word—no. I see no reason why the contractual arrangements between Members and guides should be affected. I see them carrying on in the same way.

My final question to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne is whether Members need to pre-empt all tours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings in September. I leave that question in her mind, but is the demand from Members such that other groups cannot be allowed to visit at those times? Perhaps the matter will be kept under review.

Subject to the answers to those questions, I shall—this is free-vote territory—support the proposals in the Lobby.

11 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): In the previous debate on this subject I might have played a major part in defeating the proposal that was before us then. However, it is not my intention to vote against the motion tonight. The Committee has addressed the points that were made in the previous debate and tried to come up with a proposal that deals with some of the issues raised.

I cannot pretend that the proposal is a perfectly satisfactory conclusion, but it is an improvement. We underestimate the symbolism of Parliament not only in this country, but in the whole world. In the second world war, people from throughout the Commonwealth and from nations that lost their freedom looked upon Parliament as a symbol. People should have access to the building so that they can understand the Westminster parliamentary heritage.

I still to some extent hold the view that free access should be available to people from all over the world. However, I accept the point of the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) that the proposal will produce additional access and will not replace any existing arrangements. It will give us an additional 41 days when members of the public will be able to gain access to the building. In that sense the proposal is an improvement, and a commitment has been made to consider how it has worked later in the year.

Although, in theory, I would like people to be able to turn up and visit the Line of Route, I understand why there must be regulation. Those who accompany the groups from our constituencies know the pressure points in the Prince's Chamber and elsewhere. People wait to see the Woolsack, the Lord Chancellor's Chair and the Throne in the other place and they sometimes have to queue. We also face difficulties in this Chamber when everyone wants to see where Black Rod bangs the door. There must be a sensible flow of people through those pressure points, so I understand the need for controls.

I hope that we shall make forms available, so that people can tell us how they think the system has worked. That would be useful. We could ask people to tell us anonymously how much they had paid for their tour. That would provide us with a check on what they pay the tour

[Mr. Peter L. Pike]

organisers. If the hon. Lady has not already thought of that point, she might consider doing something along those lines.

I accept what my hon. Friend the Minister said about retailing and merchandising quality souvenirs. We do not want people to buy the tat that they can buy at a cheap market anywhere in the country. We want them to be able to buy good quality stuff that befits the Palace of Westminster and the Houses of Parliament. That is extremely important.

I dismiss, however, the point about security and the £230,000 deficit. I accept that there will be a cost to the public purse, but when we consider what it costs to run this building and Parliament as a whole, £230,000, or any capital cost of setting up the scheme, is chicken-feed. We must enable the people of this country, particularly young people, to see their Parliament, where legislation is made.

We must be a symbol to people from the Commonwealth and other nations, some of which fought, lost their independence or were occupied for a period. In this new millennium we want to send out the message that this place is important, and that it stands for something and will continue to do so. We ought to enable as many people as possible to see this place, so I shall be supporting the motion.

11.6 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I had the pleasure of not only moving the amendment on 26 May but, unusually in this Parliament, of winning a vote. The vote was against the Front Benches, because although they voted in a personal capacity, the Leader of the House and her Conservative shadow voted for the proposals, and it was Back Benchers who voted against them. I was pleased to be able to defeat the establishment.

The vote was not only on the practicalities of the proposals; there was a principle involved. As the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) has just said, a number of Members felt strongly that the way in which we were being asked to proceed would commit us to a course of action not for one year but, as the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) pointed out, for five years.

That programme had all the hallmarks of something that would expand because the up-front investment would be so great that it would not be viable or economically sound if it were not extended into other parts of the year, into weekends and even possibly weekdays. The fear that Members would not be able to let our constituents come to see our Parliament at work in the long term was behind that vote.

I pay tribute not only to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) and her Committee but to the Department of the Serjeant at Arms. They have worked hard to try to take on board all the concerns expressed by Members in the former debate. I particularly draw hon. Members' attention to paragraphs 13 to 16 of the report—if they have not read them already—which set out in succinct detail the variants on the previous report. Those paragraphs contain improvements and, importantly, set out the three features that are not now part of the proposals.

First, the scheme does not involve an admission charge per se. Secondly, there will be no booth—no ticketing regime with an elaborate new building in the Victoria Tower Gardens. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) can rest assured that there will not be an excrescence on the parliamentary building at that end of the Palace.

Thirdly, and most importantly, there will still be personal guides. We shall not have those terrible audio machines that go wrong and are not adaptable. Most other attractions in London have now discarded them as not being up to the standard required for a location such as this.

Hon. Members felt that the proposals made in May were the thin end of a very big wedge, and that is why they turned them down by a large majority. On that basis, these proposals are a great improvement on the originals. However, there are concerns, and it would be wrong to let the moment pass without putting them on record. I hope that these considerations will be carefully monitored during the year.

First, the numbers have been dragged out of a hat. I know that the Committee has had expert advice, but the proposed numbers are considerable, and it will be difficult to get them through the House in a comparatively short working day. Secondly, those who already take parties around are concerned about provision for smaller groups, which could be uneconomic under the proposals unless they are amalgamated with bigger groups, but there might then be a problem with different languages.

The costs are set out in some detail, but as hon. Members have already said, they are still rather tentative. That, perhaps, is an additional reason for having only a one-year programme.

Several hon. Members have referred to the possibility that contracting out may lead to profiteering. I think that the hon. Member for Broxbourne is right when she says that we must try to monitor the scheme very carefully. The hon. Member for Burnley is right also when he says that feedback from those who are experiencing the new regime will be the best way of ascertaining whether they are getting good value for money and whether we are offering good value for money.

Finally, and most importantly, there are the efforts that have been made to make the scheme a one-off special and to have a trial period during this particular year. I do not dare mention the M word in the proximity of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). However, as there is a special exhibition in this building during the year, I think that we will find that visitors will come through during the summer who will want to see it. They will want also to see the working parts of this working building. In the circumstances, I think that a trial period with no long-term commitment is the right way forward.

On the whole, that is the way in which the House works. We experiment, evolve and improve, and we also review. I hope that in addition we shall get feedback from those most concerned. That seems the proper way forward, and I congratulate the Committee on greatly improved proposals.

11.11 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I intended to go home, but an hon. Member persuaded me to stay and vote against the motion. However, I shall not oppose it. It is

interesting that I do not see the Member in question in the Chamber. I am persuaded that before us is a long overdue measure. As I have said in the House previously, as many others will have done, we came here as children or young people and were thrilled by the place. That memory remains very much with me. I went on a tour without any organisation. I joined up at the Victoria tower and was allowed through. The system worked but I accept that the volume of visitors was different and that there had not been the terrorist regime that has blighted the past 20-odd years.

When I first visited this place, I remember the guide telling us how Ministers used to put their feet on the Table. Since the television cameras have come into the Chamber, Ministers no longer do that. However, the information intrigued me, and I was enthused by it. For the next 28 years I tried to get elected to this place. Having been elected, I rushed into the Chamber and sat down on one of the Front Benches. I put my feet up and found that they would not reach the Table. Somehow I had always felt that I would never be a Minister. I shall leave Front-Bench positions to my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office and the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young).

The tourist industry in London is well organised, with companies bringing people in from other continents. What safeguards will there be to ensure that tickets are not booked up on an organised basis so that they are all swiftly taken? That would mean that ordinary folk—perhaps small families coming up from other parts of the United Kingdom or from other parts of the world—who express an interest will be told, "I'm awfully sorry, madam, but all the tickets have been taken for today." I am nervous about that. Entrepreneurs and business managers in the big London hotels or cruise line companies will ensure that all the tickets are taken. That will be the first thing to hit the Sunday newspapers after a few weeks, and we will all be embarrassed.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: There is to be a review.

Mr. Mackinlay: I do not think that we should wait for the review. We should anticipate problems, and I hope that the one to which I have referred will be considered now.

I had not realised until this evening that merchandising is so important. My view is different from that of the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). I agree with him, however, that there must be quality products on sale that are appropriate to the House, but they must not be bland. By contrast with the shop in the House of Lords, I regret to say that the products in the Commons shop are bland and expensive. I have drawn attention to that in an early-day motion. I regret the fact that the House of Lords shop is so superior to ours in its range of quality products, many of which are very attractive. Some heads need to be banged among members of our Catering Committee.

I do not have confidence in the Catering Committee when it comes to dealing with this matter, and I hope that that will be taken on board. I am told that the running of the House of Lords shop is largely delegated to the folk who work in it, which is a good idea—better than managers on high salaries and hon. Members. I hope that that will be borne in mind.

It is long overdue that people should have access to this place. I know that it is a corny phrase, but it is the people's palace. I always say that to the people whom I bring to the House. In the seven years I have been a Member, I have never paid for a guide. Although there is a danger of my being the most highly paid tourist guide in London, I get an enormous thrill from acting out Speaker Lenthall's speech in St. Stephen's hall and from showing people the Crypt, which I know will not be part of the Line of Route. It is an important part of our job to ensure that everyone has access to this mother of Parliaments.

11.15 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): We have got ourselves in a dreadful muddle, and I suspect I know why. We cannot leave this place alone. We cannot let things be. We cannot allow things to remain as they have been, when they are reasonably or perfectly satisfactory. Everyone must now keep changing things, fiddling with them and adjusting them. I suspect that that is the main reason why we are faced with such an unsatisfactory muddle.

An example of that is the argument that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe) delivered with virtually a straight face. We were told not to worry—there will not be an admission fee, and people will just be charged for a guide. To the extent to which that was put as a serious argument, and in the expectation that those of us who opposed it last summer will now be for it, that is a distinction without a difference. It illustrates the difficulty into which the Committee has got itself.

My hon. Friend says that the House is to blame—that her Committee came up with some good ideas last year, which the House was disgraceful enough to reject. The Committee has had to come back with less good ideas, which we are asked to accept this time round. I do not accept them this time round, because they are still unsatisfactory.

The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) asked in an intervention whether other similar bodies did what is being proposed. I believe I am correct in saying that my other favourite legislature, Congress in Washington DC, does not charge for admission and does not require people to have guides. I have gone on to Capitol Hill many times, gone through security and been able to guide myself round the building.

That, I thought, was right and appropriate. If it is possible in Washington DC, I should have thought that we could manage something similar in this place, without all the paraphernalia laid out in the report.

Dr. Palmer: Did the right hon. Gentleman happen to be present when one of the visitors attempted to assassinate a member of the House of Representatives with a machine gun, and instead wounded several of the staff?

Mr. Forth: I was not there at the time, but whether the gentleman with the gun would have been deterred by a charge for a guide, I am not entirely certain. I do not see the validity of what the hon. Gentleman is trying to tell me.

[Mr. Forth]

The other spurious argument that we are offered this evening is that this is only a trial. We have all heard that before. We were sold that pup when the televising of the House was proposed. That was supposed to be an experiment. We are being sold it again with the ridiculous and expensive alternative Chamber that has been wished upon us. We are told that that is an experiment. You know and I know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it is nothing of the kind: it was declared a triumph some time in the summer and made permanent.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, gave the game away. I noted his words carefully. He said that he knew that the proposal was only a trial, but he hoped that it would be extended. If that is not prejudging and giving the game away, I do not know what is.

Let us make no mistake about it: if we support the motion tonight, which I hope we will not, we will be in a mess; we will be kidding ourselves, our public and our voters, and the change will almost certainly be permanent in one form or another. The proposal is unfortunate, and I hope that the House will not feel obliged to support it tonight. It can be put on ice.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am surprised that my right hon. Friend has not asked one question. A range of figures has been discussed—in the previous report, £5-plus per person. Now that the proposal is for a guide ticket, no one has said what it will cost individuals who visit the Palace of Westminster. We heard a price of around £2.50 mentioned—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's intervention is far too long.

Mr. Forth: I do not know the answer to the question. It is significant that no one else, except perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne, knows.

Mr. Heald: The appendix to the report explains that the cost would be between £2.50 and £3 per visitor.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but I do not know how he is able to say that, because if there is no mechanism for control or regulation, the charge could be any amount of money.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I always believed that the right hon. Gentleman opposed regulation.

Mr. Forth: I oppose regulation and am an unrepentant advocate of the free market, but I was trying to answer my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) by pointing out that we cannot know the figure because it would be unregulated and would thus find its own level. We are operating in the dark.

For all the reasons that I outlined, I remain completely unconvinced. If we have the opportunity for a Division, I shall vote against the report.

11.21 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): We are discussing the mother of Parliaments. We have talked about not knowing whether the cost of visiting this place will be £2.50 or £3. We have considered additional merchandising and said that it should not be tat, as if that were important. However, if we wish to promote representative democracy, we want as many people as possible to visit us here—whether we are working or not—on six or even seven days a week. I oppose charging.

During the summer, educational facilities are made available. Many youngsters visit the House, and several hon. Members give up their time to talk to school pupils and explain what we do. We do that to promote representative democracy, which we demean by talking about charging £2.50 or £3 for small groups of people, many of them tourists on package tours. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) was able to visit Parliament when he was a youngster, and get in without being part of a guided tour. He was so excited by what he saw that he ended up on the Government Benches, albeit below the Gangway.

We should do all that we can to excite people of all ages about our work here. If we turn Parliament into a theme park, with a little tuck shop where we sell souvenirs—any old tat with a portcullis for which we can charge twice as much as it is worth—we do Parliament and democracy a disservice.

I shall not vote in favour of or against the proposals. I emphasise that we ought to consider what we do to encourage people to vote. Tomorrow, we shall again consider the Representation of the People Bill. Voting statistics show that people are turned off by representative democracy.

Mr. Pike: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: No. After what people have heard this evening, I suspect that even fewer will vote in future.

11.24 pm

Mrs. Roe: With the leave of the House, I shall wind up the debate. Many hon. Members have made points and it is courteous to try to respond.

The debate has been interesting and I am grateful to all hon. Members who contributed to it. I thank the Parliamentary Secretary for his support and I agree that all the souvenirs that are sold here should reflect the dignity of the House and be of high quality.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) for his support. He raised several questions. I agree that we should monitor carefully any possible abuse of charging by the operator. I made that point and we put it in the report, quite legitimately, to bring it to the attention of the House and so that everybody will know that we shall keep a careful eye on it.

On Members' use of the Line of Route in August and September, my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Hampshire suggested that every day might not be needed. I have given my word that there will be no change in the current arrangements and my right hon. Friend will understand that this is not a matter that the Administration Committee should consider at this time. Members will have the same opportunity to bring their constituents to the House as they do now.

I thank the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) for his support and also for his suggestion about the survey that might take place among visitors. I am sure that the organisers will note that extremely helpful suggestion.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Will the hon. Lady make it clear to those who operate the system that we will reverse it if they abuse it?

Mrs. Roe: That, of course, is the ultimate sanction and I am certain that the organisers will understand that that is exactly what will happen if they do not toe the line and behave honourably.

I am most grateful to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) for his support and also for his advice and assistance during our deliberations while we were suggesting the new framework and when the whole matter was being reconsidered. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) will not vote against the motion and I reiterate that we shall monitor take-up of the tickets. On merchandising, I have already explained that I believe that high quality is very important. The Administration Committee is of course not responsible for that end of the House of Commons' selling programme, which comes under the Catering Committee, and I am sure that the Chairman of that Committee will note the points that he has made.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) argued for visits to the Palace to be totally free, but visits are not free at the moment unless visitors are personally escorted by an hon. Member or by a member of staff. As I said in my opening speech, under the present arrangements many people already pay a modest charge to come through—

Mr. Pike: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Roe: No, because I have only three minutes in which to speak.

Mr. Pike: On a quick point?

Mrs. Roe: I shall give way briefly.

Mr. Pike: In answer to the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), will not the overwhelming majority of people—whether they visit the Palace in the recess or at another time or go into the Gallery—come into the building absolutely free?

Mrs. Roe: That is absolutely right, and I am sure that my hon. Friend has taken that point on board.

I find the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst confusing, because I feel that he was suggesting that the guests of hon. Members might pay to come into the House and the general public might not. Surely that cannot be right. Perhaps I misunderstood and he was advocating scrapping the present arrangements so that guests cannot take part in any tour if an hon. Member cannot personally escort them. I find it difficult to understand where my right hon. Friend is coming from.

I reiterate that we propose an additional facility. None of the present arrangements for access will be changed and, as I said in the debate last year, no one will have to pay to see the House or its Committees at work or to meet their or any other Member of Parliament. The arrangements are exactly the same as they always have been.

I hope that the House will not divide, but if it does, hon. Members should be fully aware of the possible implications. The proposal will give many more people—possibly as many as 80 per cent. of whom will be overseas visitors—the opportunity to see the home of Parliament and its treasures. For some, and possibly most, of those visitors, a tour of the Palace of Westminster will be the opportunity of a lifetime. Should the House vote against the motion, there would be no alternative: no amendments were tabled and therefore there would be no advice or instructions for the Committee to follow up. The choice, I regret to say, is not between paying for a guide or providing one free, but between reopening the Line of Route this summer or having to forget the whole proposal.

Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 78, Noes 4.

Division No. 33] **[11.29 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Atherton, Ms Candy
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Betts, Clive
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Browne, Desmond
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clwyd, Ann
Crausby, David
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dobbin, Jim
Dowd, Jim
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Foulkes, George
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Heald, Oliver
Heppell, John
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jenkins, Brian
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Key, Robert
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lepper, David
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
McAvoy, Thomas
Mackinlay, Andrew
Merron, Gillian
Miller, Andrew
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Olner, Bill
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Quinn, Lawrie
Rendel, David
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sawford, Phil
Spellar, John
Stewart, Ian (Eccles)
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tipping, Paddy
Touhig, Don
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Watts, David
Wray, James
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. William Ross and Dr. Nick Palmer.

NOES

Barnes, Harry
Cousins, Jim
Dalyell, Tam
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Christopher Chope.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the First Report from the Administration Committee on the Revised Framework for Re-opening the Line of Route during the Summer Adjournment (HC98).

COMMITTEES

Environmental Audit

Ordered,

That Mr. Laurence Robertson be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Sir Richard Body be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth]*

Public Administration

Ordered,

That Mr. Nicholas Soames be discharged from the Select Committee on Public Administration and Mr. John Townend be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth]*

Nancekuke Base

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

11.40 pm

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): This debate concerns both my current constituents and, sadly, some who are no longer with us. The issues that I plan to raise involve the use of land by the Ministry of Defence on the north coast of my constituency, at the base formally called Nancekuke, near Portreath. I shall be asking for a totally new inquiry into operations at Nancekuke and the possible effects on my constituents.

Nancekuke was a chemical defence establishment—although that rather bland title hid its real role. Nancekuke was used to produce and test nerve gas after the second world war, and some of its equipment was salvaged from Nazi Germany.

The production of nerve gas was given real impetus by the arms race, and the fear that the eastern bloc was moving ahead in the sphere of chemical warfare. As the Government stated in a declaration to the United Nations, Nancekuke was the United Kingdom's main chemical weapons research and development facility. Chemical weapons produced at Nancekuke were, it is believed, used offensively by the United States until 1964. More than 20 tonnes of the nerve agent GB sarin were produced at Nancekuke—which was a rather large amount, one might think, for research purposes alone.

Nancekuke closed in 1980, after the 1976 defence review, and the buildings and equipment were buried on the site. That is but one of the issues that I wish to pursue in the debate.

Nancekuke consists of eight scattered farms and old quarries and is at the heart of Cornwall's mining history. Many mines were never mapped. Mining is not referred to within the said disclosure to the United Nations. Originally, during the second world war, the site was used as an airfield, but, in the 1950s, people realised that it was being used as an Army research centre.

The base first reached prominence when a local Redruth man, Trevor Martin, claimed that he was suffering from nerve gas poisoning after working as a fitter at the factory. Subsequently, it was discovered that the Ministry of Defence was dispatching nerve gas along the A30, to Porton Down, causing great local alarm.

In the 1960s and 1970s, local Members of Parliament started asking questions, and one particular story rose to prominence. It concerned Tom Griffiths, who is delighted that his personal quest for the truth may—I very much hope that it will—be successful today.

In 1958, Tom was working as a fitter at Nancekuke and had signed a declaration under the Official Secrets Act 1911. One day, he was the victim of an industrial accident, with another worker who has since died in an unrelated accident. Tom had been told to enter a laboratory cubicle without any protective clothing, after being told that it would be safe to do so. However, sarin was leaking into the cubicle.

From that day onwards, Tom has been ill. He received no atropine, which many people believe is a partial antidote. He also did not tell his general practitioner of the accident, fearing the consequences of the Official

Secrets Act provisions. Tom's cholinesterase level dropped from 133 to 105 and did not return to normal for 15 months. Consequently, Tom was misdiagnosed, and therefore mistreated.

It was not until 1969, when people started to understand Nancekuke's role, that Tom's GP realised that toxic chemicals were involved and referred him to a neurologist. He diagnosed nerve gas as being responsible for Tom's prolonged neurological and psychological problems. Later, a consultant toxicologist examined Tom and became convinced that sarin was responsible.

Subsequently, Tom spent years of medical tribunals, appeals, counter-appeals and ombudsman involvement. It was a harrowing time, to put it mildly. I could spend the entire debate outlining Tom's case, but I do not have the time.

It was eventually concluded that Tom had suffered from anti-cholinesterase action of organic phosphorous compounds. He received a very small payment from the Ministry of Defence. Tom has had to fight official secrets and duplicity for many years. It is time that his concerns were addressed.

Another worker at Nancekuke who came to see me recently was responsible for testing the blood of fellow workers. On one occasion the machine that protected him from fumes malfunctioned and blew fumes into his face rather than away from him. To this day he has suffered effects consistent with toxic poisoning.

I have also been contacted by people from constituencies further up the coast in Cornwall. They claim that toxic compounds were swept on to the beach at Padstow, leaving them burned and suffering from unusual and classic nerve gas effects. Their then Member of Parliament, John Pardoe, asked many questions about the subject. At much the same time, a large number of seals on the north coast were found dead. Decontaminants were flushed out through a cave into the sea. Those chemicals, rather than nerve gas, may well be responsible. We shall probably never know. Those who believe that they suffer to this day would like to know the answer.

All that might be the stuff of anti-nuclear dissertations, were it not for Carlton Television's south-west news programme "Westcountry Live". Its "Insight" feature broadcast last month broke new ground in the long-running saga, producing the new evidence that many believe justifies a fresh inquiry.

In 1970, because of concerns and legal battles, Ministers decided that a medical inquiry was required to look into the deaths and ill health suffered by workers at Nancekuke. I believe that there was a genuine wish to unearth the truth. I am pleased to say that it was a Labour Government decision. Sadly, in the interim between the decision to investigate and the results of the three-year survey, the Government changed complexion and the truth remained hidden. I am pleased that this Government have agreed to authorise the early release of the information. That is a tribute to open government and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister and his colleagues for agreeing to a request from Graham Smith, the reporter from Carlton Television, for privileged access to examine the documents at Kew a full three years early. They make disturbing reading.

Beneath the rather prosaic language that civil servants of only a few years ago seem to have adopted, the message is clear. Some 41 men died—nine during employment and 32 after leaving the establishment—between 1950 and 1969. We learn more than was published before about how they died. Some complicated statistical analysis was applied and the conclusion was reached that such a death rate was lower than the national average. If a small company employing 150 people lost 41 current and former employees among a relatively young and healthy cohort, alarm bells would ring.

Those men were working not underground or at sea, but in a factory and a laboratory environment. I should like my hon. Friend the Minister to look again at the issue. Can fresh thoughts be applied and modern statistical analysis used?

The key time for the production of nerve gas—we are talking about production, not research quantities—was the 1950s. During the four years from 1955 to 1959, there were 306 cases of respiratory disease—almost double the numbers for the following years. Can those figures be explained by procedures having been tightened up? Are the figures a reflection of the amount of nerve gas produced?

The report made conclusions over a 15-year period from correspondence between civil servants in the Ministry of the Defence and the Office for National Statistics. The documents show that civil servants then were well capable of spin. They wrote to the director of chemical and biological defence research saying that they wished to amend the draft letters to Members of Parliament. They eventually claimed that it was impossible to draw conclusions. In effect, they redrafted the results of the investigation politically. There was clear evidence of a doubling of bronchitis among industrial staff. That was not reported to Parliament at the time.

The overwhelming impression that one gets is of the civil servants desperately trying to manipulate the facts to help themselves out of a hole—not out of concern for the then Government's workers, but in terms of defending negligence claims. Meanwhile, trade unions and their members were fighting health actions, with the Official Secrets Act coming between them and answers.

A number of my constituents have contacted me in recent weeks, and they are genuinely concerned. In many cases, they worked at Nancekuke at the height of production. What medical checks have there been on former Nancekuke personnel since the closure? Does my hon. Friend the Minister not think that, given the high incidence of bronchial problems at the height of production, a sensible course might be to look again at the medical records of those who worked there—particularly in the late 1950s?

Will my hon. Friend look again at the case of Tom Griffiths and others—not necessarily because they seek financial compensation, but because they want to know what happened? I would like to know why it was felt that it was too dangerous in the 1950s to manufacture nerve gas at Porton Down or elsewhere, but all right in Cornwall. Was it because Cornwall is surrounded on three sides by water and has a relatively smaller population than other areas?

Nancekuke was closed in 1980. It is now a RAF listening station and attached to RAF Portreath. I have written to request a visit to the station, and I hope that I will shortly receive a positive reply. I would like to see the site for several specific reasons. When Nancekuke closed, the chemicals were transported to Porton Down.

[Ms Candy Atherton]

Could my hon. Friend confirm that, and tell the House who conducted the work? Also, the buildings and equipment that could not be guaranteed as clean after decontamination were buried on site. In effect, the polluted elements were left on site 23 years ago.

As I said, the site is a labyrinth of mine shafts. I have been told by many local people that there is a widespread belief that some of the equipment was just dumped down shafts. Production was concentrated on three sites, with the north site as the hub. I understand that only the south and central sites are used by the RAF today, and that several buildings still standing, but used for production, are not currently used.

Why is the north site not used? Are there fears for safety? When was the last complete survey conducted? Is it true that a survey of the site was conducted last year? Would my hon. Friend the Minister be prepared to use modern scientific techniques to survey the land to check that containers are not buried on the site, rather than relying on previous assurances? Will he ask the Environment Agency to monitor water levels for the foreseeable future?

My requests are given more urgency, given the experience of the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key). I understand that similar clear-up operations at Porton Down have revealed large amounts of buried chemicals—chemicals that we had been assured did not exist. I and many of my constituents have real concerns about this issue. What if the rumours are true, and there are chemicals buried locally? After 20 years, they may not be as securely buried as we would all wish. Did the recent survey find such evidence?

Given that health and safety procedures were not as rigorous even a few years ago, might the materials be leaching into the ground? Given the Porton Down experience, will my hon. Friend the Minister conduct such a survey? This is a holiday area and, rightly, local people and visitors will want to know, and be reassured if he has the answers.

I have felt as though I have been involved in a cloak-and-dagger operation since I started raising concerns about Nancekuke. Several figures in the county have implied that I am taking a risk in asking these questions. I find that rather fanciful, but respected individuals in the area have suggested that I take care.

I would like to reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Minister for his openness in enabling us to discover a little more about Nancekuke. Rather like the song, the opening of the documents has raised more questions than answers. Will my hon. Friend initiate the investigations that I am calling for? I cannot believe that it would be a problem, as the ability to locate chemical weapons and tackle leaks must be an element of armed forces training in a world where far too many countries have this capacity.

Also, the ability to monitor those affected by nerve gas and other poisons must be a skill required in tackling chemical accidents. Pensions records should assist in locating those people, and the Government could gain many new friends if, once again, they showed that they were prepared to try to resolve the problems inherited from others.

We have this opportunity and I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to look with fresh eyes. These were toxic chemicals manufactured by and close to my constituents. We all need to know the answers and I look forward to my hon. Friend's reply.

11.55 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) for this opportunity to discuss the work of the former Ministry of Supply establishment at Nancekuke in Cornwall and also the case of her constituent, Mr. Tom Griffiths. She is a strong campaigner for her constituents and we take her representations seriously. I also want to record our appreciation of our skilled staff at Nancekuke, Porton Down and elsewhere, whose work has played such a vital role in the defence of our country and our freedom.

Before I deal with the specifics of the case and the other points raised, I have to say that I do not entirely agree with my hon. Friend's view on the issue, although I entirely understand the background to the concerns that she has raised. I hope that what I have to say this evening will allay fears that former employees at Nancekuke were at significant risk of being poisoned by nerve gas or, indeed, that activities at the site might have posed, or still might pose, some sort of hazard to the local population.

It might be useful if I describe briefly the history of the establishment at Nancekuke and the site's present situation. I am sure that the House is aware of the use of chemical warfare by the Germans in the first world war when many of our service men suffered the debilitating effects of gases such as mustard and chlorine. I am sure that the House can also appreciate the devastating effects, not only for the individuals concerned but for our military operations. Those threats heralded the start of the research and development that have underpinned the UK's chemical and biological defence capability to the present day.

The great war laid down the principles for the study of chemical warfare and chemical defence and, by the outbreak of the second world war, the ability to protect the UK and its forces against the use of gas had been brought to a level that was superior to that of any other nation. The development of our retaliatory capacity had been more limited but was greatly intensified during the second world war.

Undoubtedly, at the time, our preparedness and that of our allies, did much to influence our opponents' decision not to use their considerable chemical warfare capability and we must be thankful that we were spared the additional casualties that would have been inflicted. However, it was the discovery of German shells containing nerve agents that provided a new dimension to the concept of chemical warfare and impetus to activities during the post-war period.

The site at Nancekuke was one of several involved in the nerve agent programme. Established initially as an autonomous facility of the Ministry of Supply in 1951, Nancekuke was concerned at first with the investigation of processes for the production of chemical warfare agents.

A chemical called GB—known to the Germans as sarin—emerged as the nerve agent on which the UK's chemical weapons were to be based and for that reason

was among the agents studied at Nancekuke. A pilot plant was built with a capability of producing up to one ton of nerve agent a week. Plans were also laid for a large-scale production plant. However, those never came to fruition because the UK decided to abandon its offensive chemical warfare capability in 1956.

The pilot plant was decommissioned and, from then on, the work at Nancekuke was carried out solely in support of the defensive programme seeking to address the services' requirements for equipment to detect nerve agents in the field, for prophylaxis and therapy for nerve agent poisoning, for the protection of individuals and facilities, and for monitoring decontamination and residual contamination of terrain and equipment. Various nerve agents were produced but only on a laboratory bench scale.

The House should be aware, however, that the work at Nancekuke was more wide-ranging than just the small-scale production of chemicals and agents for research and studies into the stability of those materials. There were many activities that did not involve working with nerve agents at all. For example, some production and development was concerned with riot control agents, chemicals for detectors, drugs for development as counter-measures, training stimulants and charcoal cloth for NBC—nuclear, biological and chemical—protective suits.

I turn now to the general health of personnel working at Nancekuke. There is no evidence that personnel were likely to suffer effects on their health as a result of working there, or that the local population was in danger.

I can say that because similar concerns were raised by the then Member for North Cornwall some 30 years ago, as my hon. Friend mentioned. They led to two studies by the Registrar General of the mortality and health of former employees up to 1969. As my hon. Friend knows from the answers to her recent parliamentary questions on this issue, the first study showed that the mortality of persons employed at Nancekuke was actually rather less than the average for England and Wales as a whole, possibly, it is said, due to climate and social conditions. This is also one specific instance in this matter where I have to disagree with her about secrecy: the results of the review were not kept secret but were published in the *Official Report* in 1970.

My hon. Friend noted that 41 deaths out of a work force of 150 seems extraordinarily large. However, the deaths relate to the sum total of people who worked at Nancekuke over approximately its first 20 years, not to the number in any one year. Additionally, the number of staff on the site varied by year and, for some years, was in the region of 300. Regrettably, we no longer have records of precisely how many people were employed at Nancekuke over the period, but it probably ran into a couple of thousand.

I shall risk disagreeing with my hon. Friend again. We are not convinced that the second study that looked at sickness data in Nancekuke employees warrants such attention as it has received recently in the media. Although the study into sickness and absenteeism among employees at Nancekuke could be taken to imply a greater incidence of some illnesses in some workers, it is worth stating the original expert conclusion that, due to a variety of factors, the data were insufficiently robust to be used as firm evidence of increased ill health among staff.

That was also the view of the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys in 1992, and that lack of statistical robustness is the reason why the results were not published formally. In fact, the paper itself explains why the comparisons between sickness rates at Nancekuke and the population at large might be considered invalid.

For example, the data from Nancekuke includes all sickness absences, no matter how short, whereas the national data come from social security records that are confined to absences of at least four days. In addition, the industrial workers at Nancekuke constitute only a subset of the total work force at the site and yet were compared with the total UK working population. The report states that that

"automatically biases the results against Nancekuke".

There are also a number of other issues that could be held to invalidate the report. They include age ranges, national versus regional differences for illnesses such as flu, and Nancekuke's insistence—for understandable reasons—on medical examination for all minor episodes of illness. I do not have time to go into detail about them here but, in view of those shortcomings, it might have been expected that another review would have been carried out. However, all these years later, we do not know why that was not the case.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Given the lack of a review, will the Minister make it possible for those hon. Members—such as myself and the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton)—to see the papers that are available to him? Clearly, there is no longer an issue of secrecy in this regard, but would it be possible to satisfy ourselves about the accuracy of what he is telling us?

Mr. Spellar: I shall look into the matter, and write to the hon. Gentleman.

On secrecy, I am sure that there is no question about the need for some classification to have been applied to various elements of the work at Nancekuke at the time. I should be very surprised if we disagreed on the issue of national security and the great sensitivities surrounding the chemical defence programme, but I understand that the need to protect such information can lead to unwarranted speculation and suspicion. However, the sickness data were not classified, and I am therefore pleased that I responded as I did to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler).

Before I move away from possible health effects, it is fitting to turn to the case that my hon. Friend raised tonight—that of her constituent, Mr. Tom Griffiths, a Nancekuke employee who was accidentally exposed to sarin in 1958. I agree entirely with her that this was a very regrettable and unfortunate incident, but it was an accident, not an inevitable and predictable event. My Department accepted that, as a result of the accident, Mr. Griffiths suffered some short-term ill effects, and he received compensation in 1976. This is the only case that I am aware that my Department appears to have dealt with, and I am aware of only two cases that were handled by the then Department of Health and Social Security around 1970.

The decision to close Nancekuke and transfer the remaining work to another establishment was taken during the 1976 defence review. Since 1980, the site has been

[Mr. Spellar]

known as RAF Portreath. It is currently an Air Surveillance and Control System—ASACS—reporting post. As such, it forms part of the United Kingdom's air defence system. RAF Portreath also occasionally acts as a relief landing ground for search and rescue helicopters on training activities operating out of RAF St. Mawgan.

I assure my hon. Friend that great consideration was given to drawing up a plan for the closure of Nancekuke in an orderly and phased manner, with due consideration of decontamination and disposal processes. It was certainly not the case that the withdrawal was careless or hurried, and no chemical warfare agents were ever disposed of to either the sea or the land at Nancekuke. In all, in the region of 20 tonnes of sarin were produced. Most of the nerve agents were chemically deactivated, and only small quantities were transferred to Porton for defence research. I am not aware of any chemical warfare agents being transferred to the United States, other than a few laboratory samples. Any other materials and decontaminated plant and equipment were disposed of at a number of clearly identifiable locations on the site.

Nevertheless, I recognise that there has been an evolution in thinking about matters such as contamination of water supplies. My hon. Friend will be pleased to learn about the land quality assessment that is under way at the site, in line with my Department's policy of undertaking such assessments over a 10-year period from 1996. In particular, surface soil and water samples which have been undertaken by the National Rivers Authority have shown no signs of contamination from toxic agents and, as a responsible landlord, we are considering how best to take this work forward, including appropriate consultation with the representatives of local authorities, the Environment Agency for England and Wales, English Nature, and other Departments.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of clear-up operations at Porton Down, but that is an essentially different situation. The site of concern there was a munitions testing range rather than a production facility.

The House may also be interested to know that the former activities at Nancekuke were declared by the United Kingdom under the terms of the chemical weapons convention in 1997. In addition, a team of international inspectors has confirmed that the production facilities have been destroyed and that the few buildings remaining were not being used for chemical weapon purposes. The site will be open for such inspection for at least another 10 years.

My hon. Friend asks if she may visit the site. She will be glad to know that the RAF will be happy to host her at RAF Portreath.

In conclusion, I hope that my hon. Friend and her constituents will now feel more confident about this issue. As Minister of State for the Armed Forces, I have had the opportunity to understand in some detail the importance of our progress in understanding chemical, and, indeed, biological weapons. Nancekuke provided a valuable contribution, which is still relevant in this very uncertain post-cold war world.

I commend to the House our public paper, published last July, which sets out our policy and strategy for defending the United Kingdom and United Kingdom armed forces against the threat of biological and chemical weapons. As I said at the outset, I also commend the excellent work undertaken by our employees in providing this service in defence of this country and of our freedoms.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The Minister has replied to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at ten minutes past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 19 January 2000

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

ALLIANCE & LEICESTER PLC (GROUP REORGANISATION) BILL *[Lords].*

Read the Third time, and passed, with amendments.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Objective 1

1. **Mr. Elfyn Llwyd** (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): What recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales on additionality and match funding in connection with objective 1 European structural funds; and if he will make a statement. [103487]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I meet the First Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues, including objective 1. The provision of match funding will continue to be the responsibility of the grant applicant. That ensures local ownership and commitment to the projects. Additionality of European structural funds support is measured at the level of the member state, as set out in the structural funds regulations.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that reply. Will he, however, take this opportunity to assure all potential investors in objective 1 schemes in Wales whose projects are on hold because of the Government's lack of commitment to provide full match funding, in order that the projects can progress and the best be made of the funding?

Mr. Murphy: I have made the Government's position very clear in the House and to the hon. Gentleman on numerous occasions: the spending review that has begun will address the issue between now and July. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already made clear his commitment to the success of the scheme. I remind the House that it was my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer who obtained objective 1 status for Wales in the first place. Anyone would think that the Opposition parties had gone to Berlin themselves and won the deal. They did not do that. The Conservatives never tried for objective 1 status and the nationalists never thought that we would do it. Now, between them, they are using the success of our negotiations cynically to bring down the Assembly and wreck the devolution settlement.

Sir Raymond Powell (Ogmore): I agree with what my right hon. Friend has just said to Opposition Members. Everything that we are trying to achieve on objective 1 is in support of what we promised in the general election and in the Welsh Assembly elections. I am sure that he will give sympathetic consideration to a development at the Bridgend paper mills in Llangynwyd. It deserves consideration, especially because of the high unemployment rate in my constituency. I am sure that he will look favourably at the application.

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is aware that these matters are not for the United Kingdom Government but for the National Assembly, but I am aware of the problems to which he refers. I am a valley Member myself, and I understand the importance of the factory to his constituency. He may rest assured that I will raise the matter when next I have discussions with the First Secretary.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): Will the Secretary of State admit that, in the letter that the Prime Minister wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for South–East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), it is as plain as a pikestaff that there will be no additional funding from the Treasury to bring down objective 1 funding for Wales? Does not that mean that the Assembly's health and education budgets will be raided to provide the matching funds? How does he intend to overcome that problem?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman must know something that I do not. I spend a great deal of my time—I shall do so later today and during the rest of the week—discussing with my Cabinet colleagues and other Ministers precisely the nature of the spending review and how much money will be involved for objective 1. We have to go through that spending process, as he knows. That is the way of government. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made clear our general commitment, which I repeat, but it will take between now and July for us to sort out the detail of the negotiations.

As I said, it was a Labour Government who obtained the funds for Wales and it is a great disservice to the people of Wales for Opposition Members to do nothing but criticise and whinge when they have not lifted a finger to secure those funds.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): My constituency would be happy to accept objective 1 or objective 2 status, surrounded as we are by objective 1 both to the west and to the English east. When my right hon. Friend sees the First Secretary or travels to Brussels, will he say that we would expect at the very least a £25 million grant for the A3XX project, because if we do not get that, we in north-east Wales will not look kindly on the proceedings of the Welsh Assembly in Cardiff?

Mr. Murphy: I am aware that my right hon. Friend has spent a great deal of time and energy in the past month putting the case for that project very forcefully and robustly. He knows that because I have been with him in

his constituency to look at the project. He may rest assured that I will raise the matter once again when I see the First Secretary next week.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I am not whingeing, as the Secretary of State suggested, but the House and the people of Wales need some clear answers on this subject. Can the Secretary of State confirm that there is no money in his allocation to provide any match funding for 2000–01 or 2001–02 and that, if any money were forthcoming, it would have to fall within the departmental expenditure limit? I remind him of his answer to me on 10 November 1999, *Official Report* column 621W, when he said that the departmental expenditure limit was not being changed as a result of the negotiation of objective 1 status for west Wales and the valleys. That means that any allocations would have to be taken from education, health or roads in Wales. The Welsh Assembly has no confidence in the Labour Administration. The people of Wales do not believe the Prime Minister when he says that he will not let Wales down.

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is wrong in his figures in that the allocations for the National Assembly for Wales and for my office are different. Obviously, it is for the Assembly to determine what happens in the first year of objective 1 funding. I am assured by my right hon. Friend the First Secretary that such moneys are there for the first year of that funding. As to after that, as the hon. Gentleman is aware, the Government normally fund all their projects through the spending review. The Chief Secretary has told me and other colleagues that the Treasury accepts the fact that objective 1 funding and the relationship between the block grant is different from previous years and that that will be dealt with in the forthcoming spending review.

Cardiff International Airport

2. **Mr. John Smith** (Vale of Glamorgan): When he next plans to meet the First Secretary to discuss the role of Cardiff international airport in the future economic development of the region. [103488]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have regular meetings with the First Secretary to discuss a wide range of issues including transport and its impact on the future economic development of Wales. This includes the non-devolved subject of airports—a matter reserved to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The First Secretary has not requested a meeting specifically to discuss Cardiff international airport, but access, and transport generally, are issues considered in the Assembly's economic development plans.

Mr. Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. He will be aware that the success and regeneration of the Welsh economy with objective 1 support will depend on access to an international airport providing regular, scheduled business flights. He may not be aware that Cardiff international airport may not develop to its full potential and provide such a service to business if it does not get a dual highway to link it to the motorway network. When he next meets the First Secretary, will he bring that urgent matter to his attention? If he does so, he will have the backing of nearly the entire south Wales business community.

Mr. Murphy: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising that issue. As the local Member of Parliament, he is very much aware of the significance of Cardiff airport to the Welsh economy. It is one of the United Kingdom's fastest growing airports and has the longest runway west of Heathrow and south of Manchester. On the matter that he raised, I am pleased to tell the House that the Assembly and the Vale of Glamorgan local authority are considering a link between Culverhouse Cross and the airport and have already spent about £300,000 on the design and preparation work for such a road.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Secretary of State will be aware that the economic regeneration of the catchment area that is served by the airport, and indeed the well-being of the airport itself, will depend on sorting out the mess that has arisen between the Department of Trade and Industry and the European Commission in Brussels about regional assistance. What steps has the right hon. Gentleman taken to ensure that we do not lose any companies in Wales—in that area or any other part of Wales—as a result of the fact that we are without the regional assistance that we should have had in place from 1 January? When does he expect that assistance to be in place?

Mr. Murphy: First, I welcome the right hon. Gentleman back to the House. We are aware that he is on the mend and I hope that he improves even more. Obviously, we are aware of the difficulties regarding the matter that he raises. It has been discussed in Brussels. In the meantime, I understand that the National Assembly for Wales has prepared provisional arrangements so that when companies apply for such grants they will be given conditional assistance. Obviously, I share his view that we need to sort the matter out as quickly as possible.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): When my right hon. Friend is discussing airports, would he not forget the special contribution that is made by the smaller airports, such as Pembrey airport in my constituency—which will soon start regular flights to and from London—to the economic regeneration of Wales and, in my constituency, in south Wales?

Mr. Murphy: I agree with my right hon. Friend. The Assembly has embarked on a study of air services generally in Wales, and I am sure that that will include the airport at Pembrey. The study was commissioned by the former Welsh Office and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I hope that it will be published in March.

Transport

3. **Mr. Donald Anderson** (Swansea, East): If he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the Government's legislative programme and its impact on transport in Wales. [103489]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend has discussed the impact on transport in Wales with the First Secretary and with the Assembly Cabinet. Both myself and my right hon. Friend addressed a plenary Session of the Assembly in the context of the Government's legislative programme, and we listened to the Assembly's views on a range of issues, including the impact on transport. I also meet regularly with the Assembly Secretary for Local Government, Environment and Transport and have discussed the Transport Bill with him.

Mr. Anderson: Is not one of the major co-operative achievements on transport between the Labour Government and the Labour leadership in the Assembly the fact that we have half-price concessionary fares on the buses for our pensioners in Wales, and will shortly have free buses for pensioners, under the Assembly? By chance, does my hon. Friend have to hand the number of pensioners in Swansea and Ceredigion who will benefit?

Mr. Hanson: I can confirm that British Government resources used by the Assembly will ensure that, in Wales from April 2002, all pensioners will receive free bus transport. By chance, I happen to have the numbers who will benefit in all constituencies in Wales. My hon. Friend mentioned Swansea and Ceredigion in particular, and I can tell him that more than 36,000 pensioners in Swansea city and 14,500 in Ceredigion will receive free bus transport. I hope that they will recognise that shortly in Swansea, Ceredigion and elsewhere in Wales.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Is not it time that we had a common-sense approach for the car user in Wales, including Ceredigion? In 1997, petrol prices were about 59p a litre. Now, they are about 75p a litre. Thanks to the Government, taxes on the car user have gone up by 13p a litre. What representations is the Minister making to the Chancellor of the Exchequer concerning the mugging of the rural motorist, which hits the pensioner, the student and the farmer alike? When will the Government recognise that the car in rural areas is a necessity, not a luxury? When will the Government stop caning the countryside?

Mr. Hanson: You will tell me if I am wrong, Madam Speaker, but I do believe that it was the Conservative party who introduced the fuel escalator, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has agreed to review and will decide upon, year on year, in each Budget. In Wales, £179 million is being spent on transport infrastructure—far more than was spent by the Conservative Government. We value the motorist, and we value the need for rural areas to have strong motoring economies. However, at the end of the day, we must face transport problems generally for rural and city users. The hon. Gentleman should not come to this House today to talk about the fuel escalator when the Conservative Government introduced it.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Is my hon. Friend aware that my constituency suffers from probably the worst road congestion in Wales? The railways should alleviate that, but the valleys line suffers from under-capacity because there is insufficient incentive to put down track to carry passengers. Cardiff Central railway station suffers from under-capacity, and is unable to meet the demands from the nearby Millennium stadium when 60,000 people flow out and congest its platforms. What plans do the Government have to address that under-capacity problem on our railways?

Mr. Hanson: I fully concur with the views of my hon. Friend. The Transport Bill will introduce a Strategic Rail Authority, and Wales will have a representative on that authority who will be able to argue strongly for the Welsh perspective in the interests of improving the infrastructure of the rail system in Wales. My hon. Friend has mentioned issues that are important to the valleys and to Cardiff, and I hope that we as the British Government will work in partnership with the Assembly to ensure that we improve rail transport for the needs of both communities.

Special Advisers

4. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will list the responsibilities of the special advisers to the Wales Office. [103490]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): The Wales Office has two special advisers, Professor Hywel Francis and Mr. Adrian McMenamin, both of whom assist me across the whole range of my responsibilities. Professor Francis is primarily based in Cardiff and mainly liaises with the National Assembly, and Mr. McMenamin is primarily based in London and liaises with other UK Government Departments.

Dr. Lewis: Given that the two special advisers seem rather underwhelmed with work at the moment, may I make a helpful suggestion? Does the Secretary of State realise of his two predecessors—both of whom remain Members of Parliament—that as of the new year, out of 73 Divisions of the House, one had voted only once and the other had not voted at all? As a gesture of kindness, could not he offer them the services of his special advisers to dream up some excuses for that appalling voting record?

Mr. Murphy: I am not sure how that question relates to the role of special advisers in the Wales Office. My advisers have plenty of work to do, if only to address all the issues that hon. Members have raised today.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Has my right hon. Friend discussed with his special advisers the lack of public accountability of quangos in Wales such as the Arts Council of Wales and Forest Enterprise Wales? Does he agree that the decision by Forest Enterprise Wales not to sell Chepstow Park wood will be greatly welcomed in my constituency, and that the decision by the Arts Council of Wales to suspend its flawed drama strategy will be equally welcomed?

Mr. Murphy: I am not sure whether my two special advisers can take credit for both those decisions, but I, too, welcome them. I said to him at the previous Question Time that there would be a satisfactory outcome as far as the Forestry Commission was concerned, and that has been the case. I am also delighted that the Gwent and other theatre companies have been saved.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): What are the special advisers doing, because post offices in Wales are under

threat; farmers in Wales face the worst crisis in 60 years and some of them are surviving on incomes of only £2,000 a year; when objective 1 match funding is uncertain and even a former Labour Secretary of State for Wales has criticised its handling; and when intensive care patients are being treated in recovery rooms? Is not it time that the Secretary of State retired his special advisers and invested the money saved in services that would benefit all the people of Wales?

Mr. Murphy: Again, the hon. Gentleman gives my advisers more powers than they have and certainly more money than they are paid would be needed to solve the problems to which he refers. On one specific issue he mentioned, my predecessor is fully aware that the negotiation to obtain objective 1 moneys is a process, not an event.

Aerospace Projects

5. **Mr. Lindsay Hoyle** (Chorley): What discussions he has had about the provision of financial assistance for the A400M and A3XX projects. [103491]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State meets my right hon. Friend the First Secretary on a weekly basis to discuss a range of issues that are clearly matters of great economic importance to the UK as a whole, and to Wales in particular. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has discussed those issues with my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) and the chairman of the Welsh Development Agency, Mr. David Roe Beddoe. He also visited the British Aerospace site at Broughton in September and received a deputation from the company to discuss the Airbus project, at the request of my right hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside.

Mr. Hoyle: Obviously, I share the concerns about the future of the aerospace industry. Many jobs in north Wales and Lancashire are dependent on the next two projects—the A3XX and the A400M. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the case for Wales and Lancashire is put strongly, and will he recognise that the C17s do not bring any jobs to the United Kingdom?

Mr. Hanson: My hon. Friend makes some relevant points, and I recognise the importance of financial support for the A400M and the A3XX projects. Some 4,000 jobs at the Broughton site in north Wales depend on the projects, and there is the potential there for 1,400 additional new jobs. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are in contact with the Welsh Assembly and the Department of Trade and Industry on these important matters, and we shall certainly battle in Government on behalf of Wales' interests.

Law and Order

6. **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What reports he has commissioned for 2000 on law and order issues in Wales. [103492]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I have not commissioned any such reports. Law and order in England and Wales are matters for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. However, I discuss these issues with other Ministers on a regular basis.

Mr. Hughes: Will Ministers in the Wales Office talk to their Home Office colleagues about two important law and order matters in Wales? The crime figures published yesterday for north and south Wales and for Dyfed-Powys were very good, although those for Gwent were less good. The two police forces in England and Wales with the highest rates of violent crimes as a proportion of all crimes are Dyfed-Powys and Gwent. In both of them, more than one crime in five is a violent crime—way above anywhere else in England and Wales.

Will the Minister work urgently for something to be done to discern the cause of so much violent crime in Dyfed-Powys and Gwent? Is it not possible that alcohol may contribute to the problem? If so, should not those matters be tackled as a matter of urgency?

Mr. Hanson: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, although yesterday's figures show that overall crime rates fell in three out of the four Welsh police authorities, which is good news for Wales. Clear-up rates in Dyfed-Powys and Gwent are relatively high, compared with other police authorities. However, the hon. Gentleman has raised some serious issues, and I assure him that the Government are committed to tackling violent crime. I shall discuss the matter with colleagues when the opportunity arises.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): My hon. Friend knows that it is three years since the Waterhouse inquiry into child abuse in north Wales was commissioned. There is considerable concern at the long delay in publication of the report, especially among my constituents, some of whom were directly involved in that child abuse. They are now adults and they want to know when the report will be published. Will my hon. Friend give some indication of when that will happen?

Mr. Hanson: My hon. Friend raises an important issue in which I take great interest, both as a Member of Parliament representing a north Wales constituency, and as a Wales Office Minister. The report has been received by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. It is currently being prepared for publication, and the summary of the report is being translated into Welsh. I anticipate that we will be able to publish the report as soon as that work is complete, and I look forward to that happening soon.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Who is to blame for the rising crime in Wales—the Labour Government in London, or the Labour regime in Cardiff?

Mr. Hanson: The figures published yesterday showed that crime fell in three of the four police authorities in Wales. The Government have put extra resources into those authorities, with the result that Wales now has more police officers in post and on the beat than when the previous Conservative Government left office. The record

of this Government is that there are more police officers, and that crime has fallen in three out of the four authorities in Wales.

Block Grant

7. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What arrangement has been put in place for the regular review of the block grant for the Welsh Executive. [103493]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): The Welsh block is determined within the framework of public expenditure control in the United Kingdom, and is normally assessed during the regular reviews of the Government's spending plans. The next spending review is taking place this year and continues the three-year planning cycle established in the comprehensive spending review.

These arrangements are detailed in the document "A Statement of Funding Policy", published by the Treasury on 31 March 1999.

Mr. Bruce: I am sure that the Secretary of State would wish to boast that Wales already gets more than its fair share of central Government expenditure, and that it has done very well out of regional assistance. Does he agree that to give extra money to the Welsh Assembly for match funding would be wholly unfair to the UK taxpayer?

Mr. Murphy: First, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that Wales gets only its fair share of public expenditure. The system to which he refers has served Wales well for two decades. Any money going to Wales under objective 1 funding is a result of the fact that Wales qualifies, in terms of deprivation, for objective 1 status.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [103517] **Mr. David Crausby** (Bolton, North-East): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 19 January.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

Mr. Crausby: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Is it not the case that nurses, midwives and national health service staff thoroughly deserve their pay rise for the way in which they have kept the NHS going, not only in the face of the flu epidemic, but in the face of a generation of Tory neglect? On future health funding, can my right hon. Friend confirm that private medical insurance for a pensioner couple costs up to £87 a week? Does that not show that Tory policy on privatisation is totally out of touch with the needs of the majority of the British people?

The Prime Minister: The additional pay award will help recruit and retain nurses in the health service. Indeed, there has been a 24 per cent. increase in the number of nurses starting training as a result of the increase last year. There is a very clear choice. Conservative policy is to ensure that there is tax relief for private medical insurance. The cost of providing such tax relief for those who already have private medical insurance would be enough to wipe out the entire nurses' pay award for this year, plus cancelling every refurbishment of every accident and emergency department in this country. The Conservatives are doing that because of their so-called tax guarantee. The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), said this of it:

"to say that you are going to reduce the proportion of taxes to GDP in all circumstances is mad . . . You simply don't unless you make . . . swingeing cuts in the health service".

That is the Conservative policy.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): With crime rising for the first time in six years—violent crime is up 6 per cent., robbery by 19 per cent., and total crime by more than 110,000 offences—has not the Prime Minister's failure to be tough on crime now become one of the causes of crime? Is it not the case that thousands of victims of crime have discovered that the right hon. Gentleman's pledge to be tough on crime was empty, worthless and fraudulent?

The Prime Minister: It did not take the right hon. Gentleman long to move off the subject of the health service.

Since the election, recorded crime has fallen by 7 per cent. It is correct, particularly in respect of the rise in the West Midlands and Metropolitan police force figures, that the recent figures show a 2 per cent. increase. But I remind the right hon. Gentleman that under the Government of whom he was a Member, crime doubled.

Mr. Hague: When the right hon. Gentleman took office, crime had fallen—was falling—and the number of police officers was up by 16,000. Now police numbers have fallen by more than 1,000 under the Home Secretary, stop-and-search powers have not been used, honesty in sentencing has been dropped, police morale has plummeted and crime is rising after six years of falling. Who does the right hon. Gentleman think is responsible for the rise in crime, the fall in police numbers and low police morale in the past year?

The Prime Minister: Let me correct the right hon. Gentleman. Crime did not fall under the Conservatives—it doubled. As a matter of fact, domestic burglaries have fallen by 20 per cent. and the theft of vehicles has fallen by 17 per cent. The right hon. Gentleman says that we are not introducing any tougher measures on crime. It is this Government who have introduced tougher measures for drug dealers; it is this Government who are halving the time that it takes to get juvenile offenders to court; and it is this Government who have introduced the policy of "three strikes and you're out" for burglary.

Mr. Hague: Yesterday, the chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation said that the Home Secretary

"has presided over the largest fall in police numbers for years, a huge rise in crime and the most demoralised force".

The police know who to blame, and they know that the Prime Minister's pledge to be tough on crime has turned out to be a worthless aspiration.

As the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about pledges, will he tell us whether, when he said that he would increase health spending by 5 per cent. in real terms for five years, that was an absolute pledge or an aspiration?

The Prime Minister: Let me respond to the right hon. Gentleman on crime. As I admitted a couple of Question Times ago, it is correct that police numbers continued to fall during our first two years, because we had inherited proposals that were made by the Conservatives. It is also correct that police numbers fell during the last few years of the Conservative Government by more than during our first two years. However, as a result of the fund introduced by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, we can now recruit more police officers and turn that around.

In relation to health, I stand entirely by what I said on "Breakfast with Frost".

Mr. Hague: Yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Delyn (Mr. Hanson), who is on the Front Bench next to the Prime Minister, said:

"We shall ensure that, over five years, there is a 5 per cent. real-terms funding growth in the national health service."—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 744.]

That is a clear pledge.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister's spokesman said:

"I can't say there will be a 5 per cent. increase this year, next year, and so on."

Those are utterly incompatible statements. Which one represents Government policy?

The Prime Minister: Let me read what I said on the Sunday programme:

"If we run the economy properly over the next few years"—

Hon. Members: If!

Madam Speaker: Order. I am not deaf; I can hear what is being said.

The Prime Minister: I said:

"we've got the first year . . . of substantial extra resources for the Health Service going in. Next year is the same, the year after that it's the same. If this July when we work out the next three year period after that three year period we can carry on getting real-term rises in the Health Service"

we will come up to the European Union average.

I am entirely confident that we will get those 5 per cent. real-terms rises, because that is what we have achieved in this comprehensive spending review. The choice, therefore, is between the Labour Government, with our 5 per cent. real-terms rises, and a Conservative party, which, because of its tax guarantee, will not commit itself to spending any extra money on the health service. That, of course, is why the Conservatives go for the ludicrous notion that the problems in the health service can be solved by private medical insurance. When the right hon. Gentleman gets to his feet, perhaps he will say whether it is indeed his policy to make that private medical insurance compulsory.

Mr. Hague: Let us have an answer from the Prime Minister, instead of that waffle about what he said. So far, we have had Frost on Sunday, panic on Monday, U-turn on Tuesday and waffle on Wednesday. If there was a pledge, why, yesterday, did the Prime Minister's spokesman say that he could not say that there would be a 5 per cent. increase year on year? That was the Prime Minister's spokesman—he is responsible for his spokesman. [HON. MEMBERS: "No he isn't."] Oh, the right hon. Gentleman is not responsible for his spokesman. Not only does he deny responsibility for most things that are happening in the country, he now denies responsibility for his own press spokesman. Is the right hon. Gentleman happy to repeat the statement made in the House last night by his junior Health Minister, who said:

"We shall ensure that, over five years, there is a 5 per cent. real-terms funding growth in the national health service."

The Prime Minister: We are putting in a 5 per cent. real-terms growth. We are doing that. As I have said—not only on "Breakfast with Frost", but in the House in December—if we carry on running the economy properly, we can get these real terms rises in. [HON. MEMBERS: "If!"] If the Opposition think that the public will be disappointed, come July and the comprehensive spending review, they will find that they are the ones to be disappointed.

One of the reasons that we can bring in the real-terms rises is the way in which we have run the economy. There are 700,000 extra jobs. Social security spending on the costs of economic and social failure are falling. The choice is between our pledge to put in those extra resources, which we are doing, and the right hon. Gentleman's pledge that he will force people to go to private medical care for non-urgent operations.

In *The Sunday Times* this Sunday, the Conservative health spokesman said that

"the Conservatives are no longer concerned with the maintenance of the NHS as the primary provider . . . 'Philosophically, we have moved on . . . Insurance companies could cover conditions that are not high tech or expensive, like hip or knee replacements, hernia and cataract operations. We could then leave expensive treatments like cancer therapy to the NHS'".

If that happened, it would cost people over 60—many of whom are watching our proceedings—£60 to £80 a week to take out private medical insurance.

The reason why the right hon. Gentleman cannot commit himself to match our resources in the health service is the tax guarantee. Perhaps he will finally explain what his policy is. I believe that this is a classic Hagueism—a misjudgment—because he gave the tax guarantee, and now he wants to give a spending guarantee, but the two do not add up.

Mr. Hague: One might think that the right hon. Gentleman had enough to do misrepresenting his own policies without misrepresenting ours. He knows that we are committed to improve and expand the national health service, but he also knows that every informed commentator and every other Government in Europe

believes in also improving health care from other sources—except him, with his blinkered ideology and his hostility to the private sector.

Today, we have seen that what the right hon. Gentleman said on Sunday was not an announcement of money to get the health service through the next five years but a piece of rhetoric to get him through the next five days. Fraud in this country has gone up by 29 per cent. but in his answers it has gone up 129 per cent.

We now have a country where crime is up, waiting lists are up, the NHS is in crisis and police numbers have fallen. Things are getting worse under Labour. Does not Britain deserve better than that?

The Prime Minister: Let us just deal with two of the points that the right hon. Gentleman makes. The first is that we are not prepared to look at other health care systems. Perhaps, in light of what has been in the media in the past few days, I should explain what happens, for example, under the German or the French system. German employers have to pay about 7 per cent. on top of each worker's salary for health cover. Each worker has to take about £1,300 out of their pay to fund health insurance. In France, employers pay about 12 per cent. on top of each worker's gross wage. There is no way whatever that private medical insurance could solve the problem in the health service—none.

The right hon. Gentleman says that we are refusing to co-operate with the private sector. We shall of course co-operate where it is sensible. The private finance initiative in hospital buildings is co-operation with the private sector. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman today that half of NHS residential care—worth £730 million a year—is provided with the private sector. What is a con trick, though, is to tell people, when we need more nurses, doctors and facilities in the national health service, that forcing people who will not be able to afford it to go private will solve the problems of the national health service. It will not.

Finally, let me deal with how the right hon. Gentleman tries to get out of this, because he has his tax guarantee and his waiting list guarantee or his patient guarantee. A short time ago, he said in the House that he would fund his way out of this problem by making savings because—people will remember this—the costs of Government had risen by more than £1 billion since we came to power. We have had that figure checked. The right hon. Gentleman gets to it in this way.

First, the right hon. Gentleman deals in cash terms, not real terms. *[Interruption.]* Well, most people deal in real terms. Secondly, he takes as his starting point the end of the financial year 1997–98. Forgive me, but I thought that we were in power between 1997 and 1998. Taking the true figures, under the present Government the cost of central Government has actually fallen, not risen. So the way the right hon. Gentleman funds his pledges is rubbish. The truth is that, every time he turns his mind to policy, he has zero judgment. His policies are a joke and his party is divided; and that is one reason why this country will never trust the Tories with the health service again.

Mr. Jimmy Hood (Clydesdale): Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the Government have no intention to legislate to allow the promotion of homosexuality in our schools?

The Prime Minister: We believe, as we have said already, in getting rid of section 28. That is not because we believe it right to promote homosexuality but because we believe it is right for school teachers and others to be able to explain to children properly the facts of life. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish."] Some people may make political capital out of the issue, but I think that it is a sensible change and that it is the right change. I hope that we can get a more mature debate on it than we have had in certain quarters.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Assuming that the Prime Minister and the Government intend to go ahead with the proposed 1 per cent. reduction in income tax in April this year, could the right hon. Gentleman tell us how much that will cost the Exchequer?

The Prime Minister: I also said in the interview that I gave on Sunday that the measure is in part compensation for the other tax changes that are being made. I believe that it is the right thing to do. Yes, we can always put up taxes and spend more, but, as a result of the changes that we have made, we will put this year into the national health service—

Mr. Kennedy: How much will it cost the Exchequer?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asks, "How much?" We will put in a real-terms increase of 6 per cent. That works out both in real and in cash terms as several times the amount that he pledged at the last election.

Mr. Kennedy: I simply asked the Prime Minister how much it would cost, and answer came there none. It will cost more than £2 billion in April of this year. How many people out there in the country would rather see that money going on local hospitals, solving the problems of the health service, dealing with the operations that have been cancelled and so on and so forth? That is our priority; that is where the money should go. Why is it not the Prime Minister's priority? He should be putting the money towards health and not towards tax cuts.

The Prime Minister: First, let us deal with the Liberal Democrats' economic policy. As a matter of fact, on the Finance Bill, they have tabled deletions of rises and tax cuts that amount to more than 1p on the standard rate of income tax. If they are going to be consistent, there is no way that their sums add up at all.

Secondly, the important thing is that we are now able to get into the national health service really big real-terms rises. Why? Because we have run the economy effectively. I make no apologies whatever for allowing people to keep more of their income tax, but I tell the right hon. Gentleman, as I said to him last week, that what the Liberal Democrats cannot do is launch attacks on us because they say that we have raised the tax burden one week, then tell us the next week that we should put it up even further.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware of the great steps forward that the Government have made in addressing the issues of child care and family friendly policies. Is he also aware that the

House is failing to meet the needs of its staff, who desperately need access to child care? As a parliamentarian, will he join me in supporting, in this new century, a chance to modernise this place to ensure that staff have access to child-care facilities for their children?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I have more than a passing interest in child care. However, I say to my hon. Friend that this is a matter for the House authorities and it would be wrong for me to say more than that.

Referendums

Q2. [103518] **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on his policy in respect of the equalisation of the total sums of public money to be spent on each side of the argument in future referendum campaigns.

The Prime Minister: The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill received its Second Reading last week and will put into effect the Neill committee recommendations. It provides that up to £600,000 of public money should be made available by the Electoral Commission to designated umbrella organisations on each side of any referendum campaign.

Dr. Lewis: Given that the Bill allows equal sums of public money to be made available, why is the Prime Minister also putting into the Bill rules that mean that parties that favour the euro will be able to spend much more of the money that they raise than parties that are opposed to British entry into the euro? Could that be because at least 64 per cent. of the British people are opposed to the Prime Minister's policy of abolishing the pound, and he knows that he can only hope to get it through by rigging the rules in that way?

The Prime Minister: That is nonsense. The two main parties will qualify for the same limit. In any event it could not be said that the no campaign was not well funded; indeed I should have thought that the opposite could be said. The rules are very fair for the no and yes campaigns because the sum of public money given to each side will be precisely the same, and the limit is the same for the main political parties. There is parity of treatment on both sides.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): On the equalisation of moneys for the referendum, is the Prime Minister aware that Yorkshire property developer Mr. Paul Sykes told the *Yorkshire Post* last year that he is prepared to spend his £235 million fortune campaigning against Europe and the euro? He is already spending £20 million putting up very flattering pictures of me with my name on in my constituency, which my constituents think I have paid for myself, so I thank him for that.

Is the Prime Minister further aware that the Tories' new isolationist, anti-European business friends are already raising millions of pounds, in addition to the fact that newspapers owned by foreign proprietors campaign day and night against Europe? Will he ensure that when a referendum happens, there is equal play for those of us who believe that Britain's future lies in Europe and that we should not join the Tory crusade to isolate Britain from Europe?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right, which is why, as I said to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), the no campaign is incredibly well funded, and it would be rather odd for anyone to claim that it would be discriminated against in funding.

Engagements

Q3. [103519] **Mr. Richard Spring** (West Suffolk): Is the Prime Minister aware that every independent analyst and the House of Commons Library show that the so-called £21 billion health spending increase is, in real terms, £6.3 billion? If we used the Government's double and treble counting for the Prime Minister's age, on his next birthday he would turn 93 instead of 47, and on the following birthday he would enter the "Guinness Book of Records". In view of the crisis in the health service, perhaps a bit of straight talk and simple truth on those figures is warranted for the British people.

The Prime Minister: The £21 billion is £21 billion extra. I am sorry to have to point this out, but the one group of people who cannot complain about the amount of money going to the health service is the Conservative party. Let me educate the hon. Gentleman about his own policy. The Conservatives guarantee that they will cut taxes irrespective of the economic circumstances. There is no way that they can implement that policy while increasing spending on the health service. That is why they have never pledged to increase spending on the health service by the amount that we have pledged in this comprehensive spending review. That is no part of their guarantee. If the hon. Gentleman wants extra spending on the NHS, he should take a leaf out of others' book and start crossing the Floor.

Q4. [103520] **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): After the years of damaging Tory failure and isolation in Europe, does the Prime Minister welcome the publication today of Neil Kinnock's programme of radical action to overhaul the European Commission? If so, will he take a lead among European Union member states to make sure that we back tough action to clean up Europe and bring the Commission into the 21st century?

The Prime Minister: The programme will make substantial differences to the way in which the Commission is run and to its accountability, transparency and efficiency. [Hon. Members: "Oh!"] I am sorry if Conservative Members do not support that, but it is after all what both Governments—this Government and the previous Government—were calling for over many years. Now that it has been delivered, the least that we can do is to acknowledge it.

Q5. [103521] **Sir Robert Smith** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): The Prime Minister will know that the continuing crisis in agriculture is hitting all sectors. Specifically, does he want the pig industry—both farming and processing—to survive? To that end, will he back Agriculture Ministers' efforts to remove from the pig

industry the cost of the BSE crisis? The pig industry faces the cost of regulations relating to a crisis in whose creation it played no part.

The Prime Minister: I understand the difficulties of the pig industry. The problems, although very bad in some other countries, are especially bad in this country. We shall look and are looking for ways in which to reduce the cost and burden of regulation on the farming industry. However, some of the regulations have been introduced for animal welfare reasons, for example, the regulations on tethering animals, which were passed with cross-party consent in the previous Parliament, although they have been implemented universally only more recently. All those matters have to be seen against a background of real difficulties which are outside our control and have to do with loss of market share. We shall consider every means possible to help the pig industry, but most consumers would not thank us if we reduced animal welfare standards.

Q6. [103522] **Mr. Tony McWalter** (Hemel Hempstead): Does my right hon. Friend share my distress at the activities of carpetbaggers who deprive building societies of funds that they might otherwise have used to provide resources for affordable housing? Does he agree that borrowing members of building societies are as important as saving members? Does he agree with the Select Committee that urged swift legislation on the matter?

The Prime Minister: The Government recognise the variety and choice that societies bring to the savings and loans market. On entering office, we acted promptly to increase the turnout threshold on conversion votes from 20 per cent. to 50 per cent. Only a society's board can propose conversion, which requires the support of 75 per cent. of saving members on a 50 per cent. turnout, and 50 per cent. of borrowing members who vote. Those are high thresholds, which have been reinforced by our action, but it is right that they are high. The current balance is correct.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): The Prime Minister will know that the Royal Ulster Constabulary is one of the few police forces to have had the honour of being awarded the title "Royal". What precedent is there for removing such an award, and is not its removal regarded as a sign of dishonour? Nothing the Government say or do can dishonour the RUC and the men who have served in it, but they can dishonour and are dishonouring themselves.

The Prime Minister: There is no dishonour intended to the RUC: its officers have given their lives and shown outstanding bravery for many years. We are trying to ensure that Northern Ireland has a police service that is capable of attracting support from all sides of the community, so that it can police better. For that very reason, the Good Friday agreement provided for an independent commission, which has been headed by a former Northern Ireland Minister in the Conservative Government, to look closely into the issues. I do not want to pre-empt the statement that is to be made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, except to say that our desire in making any changes is not to devalue in any shape or form the enormous contribution made by the RUC, but to ensure that we get a police service in Northern Ireland that can attract people from all communities and enjoy the confidence of people from all communities, because we believe that that is an important part of a better future in Northern Ireland.

Q7. [103523] **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the draft regulations on part-time workers published on Monday by the Department of Trade and Industry will be welcomed by the CBI, the TUC and part-time workers—in fact, everyone but the Conservatives, who do not appear to like the fact that the regulations emanate from Europe and that they give workers rights? Will he assure the House that he will consider carefully ways in which the rights to fair pay, holiday entitlement and training opportunities that are offered to part-time workers can be extended to casual workers?

The Prime Minister: We will certainly consider the point that my hon. Friend makes about casual workers. The purpose of the new regulations is to ensure that part-time workers get a proper deal. That is part of ensuring that we have a labour market in which there are certain basic standards in place. The minimum wage is one such standard. The fact that we are introducing proper rights for part-time workers and the fact that people will have for the first time the right to paid holiday entitlement are all basic, decent rights. They are all things that the Conservatives are committed to scrapping. That shows only how entirely out of touch they are.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. Time is up.

Patten Report

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. Peter Mandelson): With permission, Madam Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's decisions on the report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland, known as the Patten report after its chairman, Chris Patten.

Of all the issues that have divided society in Northern Ireland, policing is probably the most controversial. In the past 30 years, the Royal Ulster Constabulary has faced demands completely unlike those faced by any other force in the United Kingdom or, indeed, elsewhere in the developed world. I would like to place on record the Government's deep admiration for the courage, resilience and professionalism with which the RUC has met these challenges. The accounts that I have heard of personal tragedy, pain and loss in the RUC family are profoundly moving and humbling. Three hundred and two officers have been killed, and many thousands injured. We all owe the RUC a huge debt of gratitude. The George Cross is a fitting acknowledgement of its sacrifice.

However, in rising to the challenge, the RUC has inevitably, if unfairly, become identified more with one side of the community than the other. It finds it hard to recruit from the nationalist community and, with 88 per cent. of its members Protestant and only 8 per cent. Catholic, is not representative of all sides of the community. That is not a desirable state of affairs. The RUC itself is forward looking and accepts the need for change. It is eager to police a normal society in a normal, professional way, but it is held back by the burden of history.

The talks which led to the Good Friday agreement addressed but did not resolve these problems. Instead, Chris Patten and his colleagues were asked to design arrangements for

"a police service that can enjoy widespread support from, and is seen to be an integral part of, the community as a whole."

The Patten commission rose to this challenge and I pay tribute to it. Its report covers, among other things, composition, training, culture, ethos and symbols. My right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam) accepted the report in principle, and launched a period of consultation about the details. Since my own appointment, I have met all the interested parties and police groups—some more than once—and have listened very carefully indeed to what they had to say.

The decisions that I am announcing today will be reflected in legislation which we will bring forward later in the Session. In reaching them, I have been driven by, and have tried to keep in balance, three distinct but interdependent considerations: representativeness, effectiveness, and respect for the sacrifices of the past. I say "interdependent" because only a police service that is accepted and draws members from both traditions and is therefore accepted throughout the community can hope to be fully effective. It is only by recognising the sacrifices of the past that we can move forward together to meet the challenges of the future. I am determined that the police in Northern Ireland should be modern, representative and effective, and no longer the fulcrum of antagonistic debate.

However, Patten also points out that the implementation of some recommendations will

"depend to a greater or lesser degree on how the security situation develops",

and that judgments will need to be made on how and when they should be introduced. That is advice that the Government will, rightly, keep firmly in mind as we take the process forward.

Patten rightly places much emphasis on human rights. The Chief Constable and the new Policing Board together will be made responsible for developing and implementing a comprehensive programme of action, including an audit to ensure full compliance with human rights requirements.

We also accept a new police oath as proposed by Patten, which will be taken by all new recruits to the police service. I do not believe that it would be appropriate for already attested officers to take the new oath, which would in any case raise significant legal difficulties. All officers will, however, receive human rights training and will be required to behave in accordance with a code of ethics. That code will be provided for in legislation and will, like the new oath, emphasise the priority to be given to human rights.

The Government accept Patten's recommendation for the creation of a new Policing Board composed, as the report recommends, to replace the current Police Authority. The new Policing Board will be responsible for securing the maintenance of an efficient and effective police service and holding the Chief Constable and the police service to account.

I am sure that the House will wish to join me in paying tribute to the work of the Police Authority over the past 30 years. Many have served with distinction on the authority and were prepared to come forward even when there was a direct terrorist threat against them. Two members of the authority were murdered by terrorists. The contribution of the authority, its members and staff will not be forgotten.

The report recommends clarifying the roles of the Secretary of State, the Chief Constable and the Policing Board. The broad thrust of the recommendations is that the Policing Board should play a more developed role, setting objectives, priorities and performance targets, while leaving operational control and direction of the police firmly in the Chief Constable's hands.

I entirely agree with the report that the new Policing Board

"should be empowered and equipped to scrutinise the performance of the police effectively".

I therefore accept the recommendations and will introduce legislation accordingly, subject to the Chief Constable continuing to answer to me on all matters involving national security and the work of relevant agencies.

Patten proposed the creation of district policing partnership boards to provide an element of local accountability. He envisaged that they should have a primarily consultative role, with an ability to monitor police delivery against an agreed local plan, and I endorse that. He also proposed an additional community safety role, with powers to purchase services on top of normal policing. The latter activity is currently a subject being considered by the criminal justice review. Until decisions are taken on the review, which will be published shortly, I do not intend to extend their function in that way. It will

be better, in any case, to concentrate initially on building up relationships at the local level, in what I propose to call district policing partnerships. I also intend to consider further the arrangements proposed for Belfast, where I am not satisfied that it would be right to have four separate partnerships.

Progress on the style of policing and the size of the police service will be critically dependent on the Chief Constable's assessment of the security threat and the public order situation. There will be no question of rushing forward with changes in the absence of a stable security environment. Subject to that overall proviso, in line with the report, the Chief Constable has decided to re-organise the police service into district commands based on district council areas and geared towards policing in partnership with the community. District commanders will have much higher levels of devolved authority under the overall command of the Chief Constable, who intends this structural reorganisation to be under way by November.

The Chief Constable will also re-organise police headquarters to produce a slimmer structure. Headquarters will, in future, take a more strategic approach to management. Special Branch and CID will be retained and placed under a single Assistant Chief Constable, as the Chief Constable believes is desirable, when the security situation permits.

The Government accept Patten's recommendations on the future size of the police service—a regular complement of 7,500 full-time officers—provided, as the report says, that the security situation does not deteriorate significantly. We accept Patten's recommendation for the enlargement of the part-time Reserve and the discontinuation of the full-time Reserve. Again, that is subject to the security situation.

The severance arrangements to enable serving police officers, whether regular or reservist, to leave the police service will be generous and sympathetic. The Government are committed to finding the necessary resources. Negotiations with the police staff associations are currently in progress. I hope that those discussions will help all sides to agree arrangements that will address officers' understandable concerns about their future.

I attach particular importance to Patten's recommendations for action to transform the composition of the police service. They are essential to gaining widespread acceptability. I endorse the proposal for 50:50 recruitment of Protestants and Catholics, from a pool of candidates, all of whom—I stress this—will have qualified on merit. We propose that the requirement for that special measure should be kept under review on a triennial basis, with rigorous safeguards to ensure that the rightly challenging targets for recruitment do not diminish the standard required of recruits. There will be no question whatever of ex-terrorists joining the service.

Our aim is to develop a police service that is both effective and accepted throughout the community. That aim, as Patten recognises, clearly bears on the name and symbols of the RUC. The issue is not whether the name of the RUC is wrong or something of which people should not be proud. I understand exactly why serving and former officers, their families and, indeed, widows are proud of the RUC and its name. The issue is whether a change in name, underlining a new start, is a necessary and indispensable part of attracting balance in recruits to the new police service.

Of course, the name is not the only barrier to recruitment. At times, there has been disgraceful intimidation of nationalists who wished to join the RUC. However, a change of name was, in Patten's view, essential, and I agree.

That change is needed to signal the new beginning, which will be symbolised in particular by the arrival in the new training environment of the first recruits entering through the new independent procedures and selected on the new balanced basis. That point will come in the autumn next year. At that point, too, I will bring into force the new title, which will be the Police Service of Northern Ireland, a name that I believe is preferable to that proposed by Patten.

At the same time, a service badge incorporating this title will be introduced after the new Policing Board has had a chance to address the issue. In that context, the RUC will wish to consider how best permanently to record the award to it of the George Cross last autumn. Existing police memorials will remain as they are, and the colour of the uniform will not change.

The Government also accept Patten's important recommendation for information technology improvements to put the police in Northern Ireland at the forefront of communications and information technology, and for police training. I am also delighted to tell the House that we have accepted the case for a new police college, and appropriate resources will be provided. Those measures are in addition to a range of other forward-looking recommendations on practical policing issues, which, although I will not detain the House by detailing them here, we will also implement.

Finally, Patten recommends the appointment of an oversight commissioner to monitor the implementation of those changes, which have been agreed by the Government. That appointment will not in any way cut across the responsibilities of either the new Policing Board or the Chief Constable, and the accountability that I and my colleagues have to the House on policing issues will not diminish as a result. The oversight commissioner will help to create a first-rate police service for the future.

The implementation of those changes will entail a major and challenging programme of work for the Government, the Chief Constable, the Police Authority and, in due course, the Policing Board, but, most of all, for police officers themselves. This is not an overnight event, but a process of change that will extend over several years. I am confident that the police will meet the challenge of change positively and with commitment.

For those in the Unionist community who have fears, I urge them to accept the need for significant change to create a police service in which all can feel that they belong and with which all can identify. To nationalists who have for so long withheld their support from the police in Northern Ireland, I would ask them to reflect on the transformation that is planned and to reconsider their position. It is now time for them to support this programme of change, unambiguously to support the police and to encourage young men and women from their community to join the police. The prize is a modern, effective police service drawing support and strength from all parts of the community. It is within our grasp. The proposals I have announced today should enable us to achieve it.

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): In paying the most handsome tribute to the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the

[Mr. Andrew MacKay]

RUC Reserve, it must be said that without their courage, even-handed professionalism and terrible sacrifice, the Good Friday agreement and the opportunities in Northern Ireland that have flowed from it would quite simply not exist. They have been the thin green line standing between the maintenance of democracy and a descent into anarchy. Their sacrifice is without equal: 302 officers have been murdered and more than 10,000 maimed or injured. The award of the George Cross is richly deserved.

With that in mind, does the Secretary of State share the widespread dismay that one of the most disappointing and hurtful aspects of the Patten report is its failure to pay proper testimony to the sacrifice and achievements of the RUC? The Patten report is nevertheless a useful basis for what policing could be like if peace were firmly established. The overwhelming majority of its recommendations are non-controversial, have been foreshadowed by the Chief Constable himself and should be implemented quickly, but there are aspects of the statement that we cannot support.

We do not believe that the name of the RUC should go. It is a name of which past and serving officers and their families are justly proud. The evidence used to support change is not convincing. The most recent Police Authority survey shows conclusively that changing the name will cause major offence in the Protestant community and will not lead to significant improvements in support from the Catholic community. The hugely respected Monsignor Denis Faul has argued for retaining the name. The Secretary of State should accept the compromise name recommended by ourselves, the Police Federation and others: the Royal Ulster Constabulary—the Police Service of Northern Ireland. If it is right to honour the force for seeing us through the past 30 years, surely the Royal Ulster Constabulary, with its proud name intact, has earned the right to be Northern Ireland's police service in what we all hope will be a new era.

The Secretary of State referred to a number of security-sensitive measures. Does he agree that it would be dangerous folly to introduce them before there is a real and lasting peace and substantial decommissioning? Will he assure us that, at a time when the capacity of the main terrorist organisations remains totally undiminished, there will not be substantial cuts in the size and capability of the force, including the abolition of the full-time Reserve?

We of course want greater representation of the Catholic community in the RUC. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the greatest disincentive to Catholic recruitment remains IRA intimidation? Like him, I call on the leaders of the Catholic community to encourage their young men and women to join the police force.

We welcome what the Secretary of State said about the district policing boards, but what guarantees can he give that they and the new Policing Board will not lead to greater politicisation of policing, rather than the removal of politics from it? Will he give me this afternoon an absolute guarantee that the operational independence of the Chief Constable will be fully preserved?

Everyone, including the RUC, recognises that there must be changes. We all share the goal of building a police service that is genuinely representative of the community, routinely unarmed and has no need of flak jackets and armoured vehicles; yet for many people, the process has been all take and no give by the terrorists. Does the Secretary of State not agree that the greatest contribution to dispelling that and to transforming the policing environment in Northern Ireland would be for the terrorists immediately and finally to begin decommissioning their illegally held weapons?

Mr. Mandelson: I say straight away to the right hon. Gentleman that I certainly share his views about decommissioning. The Good Friday agreement is not there to be cherry-picked; its parts stand or fall together. It is not acceptable for some parts of it to be implemented and for others to be overlooked or forgotten. Decommissioning, as Sinn Fein itself has acknowledged, is an essential part of the peace process. If it is to be completed by the deadline in the Good Friday agreement of May this year, an early start is absolutely necessary.

On the right hon. Gentleman's overall response, I am glad that he shares our vision and goals for a new beginning for policing in Northern Ireland. The problem is that, although he shares the ends, he is not prepared to will the means of getting there and of achieving that new beginning for the police service that we all want.

I, as it happens, regret that the Patten commission did not say more about the sacrifices of the RUC. I have said that before, and it remains my view. I understand why it did not, but it is a deficiency in the report, and an unfortunate one.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman—I have already said this—that one of the factors, and an important one, in discouraging people from the nationalist community from joining the RUC was straightforward IRA bullying, thuggery and intimidation. However, other important factors are that Catholics and nationalists in Northern Ireland do not identify with the RUC and that the nationalist community does not encourage its young people to join. People from the nationalist community who have thought of joining have feared a loss of family and community support for joining. We have to tackle that problem and make changes to make the police force in Northern Ireland acceptable to the nationalist community as a whole if we are to persuade individuals from that community to come forward and join that force.

I can say quite honestly that in a perfect world I, too, would have kept the name of the RUC. I would have liked it to be maintained. It is a proud name that represents a fine tradition and is rightly honoured by the whole RUC family, but I am afraid that it is not owned by both communities in Northern Ireland. I realise the hurt that is involved in giving up the name, but I equally recognise that the police service will never be entirely accepted unless that change is made, so change there must be.

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. My party will study it in detail. We look forward to working with him and with the other parties to implement the Patten report in full.

This is a time for reflection. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the basis of order in any society is not the police force but agreement on how we are governed. That is the most fundamental principle of democracy. When there is no agreement on how people are governed, no matter where that is, the police force will be seen as on one side or the other.

There have been victims of past failures to reach agreement on how we are governed. That has been the situation in Northern Ireland since it was founded. There

have been many victims of that failure, especially in the past 30 years, but now we have a new beginning and a real opportunity to create a lasting basis of peace and order on our streets. For the first time, we have reached an agreement on how we should be governed, and we are already working together to implement it.

The parties must take the opportunity to have meetings with the Secretary of State and talk to everyone who needs to be talked to about implementing the Patten report in full. That will give us a police service that has the loyalty of the entire community and a membership drawn from the entire community, so that when policemen walk the streets in Northern Ireland, no matter what district they are in, they are walking among friends. That would be a real change. It is an enormous challenge to us all, and I hope that we are up to it.

Mr. Mandelson: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman said a single word with which I disagree, but I have something to add. When we have studied what I have said, debated the detail, considered exactly how the proposals are to be implemented and all reached the conclusion that a new beginning for policing has indeed been created in Northern Ireland, that will be the time when leaders of the nationalist community, like him—both political and religious leaders—must stand up, speak up and back the police, and call for people from the nationalist community to support the police. He is right to take time to look at the details of what I have said. I hope that in due course, when he has studied them, that call will be forthcoming.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the Secretary of State accept the support in large part of my party for the proposals in the Patten report? I brought up the matter recently in Northern Ireland questions, and I am encouraged to see that progress will now be made on the proposals to try to resolve some of the issues that he has just highlighted.

We support some of the specific elements of the report: for example, the very strong emphasis on human rights, including the commitment to uphold human rights in the oath. That gives Northern Ireland a real opportunity to lead the United Kingdom in terms of the attitude and character of the police force.

Will the Secretary of State also accept our support for the concept of district policing, which puts a greater emphasis on community policing? The latter might in turn help to dismantle the power of the military vigilante operations in some parts of Northern Ireland, which lead to the completely unacceptable paramilitary beatings that have been going on for so long.

Will the right hon. Gentleman also accept our support for the introduction, at long last, of video recording in custody suites? We have criticised the Government for failing to implement that for some time. It is good to see the promise of a generous retirement and severance payment scheme. The details of the scheme will determine whether those eligible will agree to it.

Is the Secretary of State sensitive to the real and genuine concerns felt by many people, not merely in the Chamber but in Northern Ireland, about the change of name and symbols? While I recognise the difficulties and sensitivities that surround the matter, we tend to agree with the right hon. Gentleman that something needs to change. Given the reaction in the Chamber, it is clear to those who would abandon such a closely held and greatly revered name as the Royal Ulster Constabulary that such a change has to be made sensitively. Will the right hon. Gentleman give an assurance that, while some may try to score party political gain from such statements, those who genuinely represent Northern Ireland constituencies and rightly bring those concerns to the fore here today have the right to be listened to and to participate in the discussions and negotiations that must necessarily take place before those changes are implemented?

I have two further concerns. Will the Secretary of State reassure us by reiterating that the police force will not be reduced in size until it is clear that the peace is long lasting and sustainable? Otherwise, there could be instability.

Will the Secretary of State commit himself to asking about quotas? Does he realise that getting more Catholics into the police force cannot be achieved simply by having a 50:50 quota in place? As he said, the key issue is that Catholics have been dissuaded from applying. Will he consider adding to the Patten recommendations by doing something to promote such applications in the first place?

Finally, the Patten report is, by and large, uncontroversial, as we have heard. Therefore, the Secretary of State will need to give us an assurance that the matters that are so controversial and provoke such strong emotional as well as intellectual reactions will need to be handled with the greatest sensitivity in the House.

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support and that of the Liberal Democrat party for what I have announced. I can readily accept and endorse the bulk of what he said. On the oath, the House may be interested to learn that the Home Secretary is considering extending the reference to human rights to the police oath for the United Kingdom as a whole. That would be welcome.

On the hon. Gentleman's questions, yes, we will be doing everything we can to promote the new police service and to encourage applicants from all parts of society in Northern Ireland, not merely nationalists, to join. On reducing the size of the police service, that is a judgment that the Chief Constable will make in the first instance, and it will indeed be linked to his assessment of the security threat.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): The Secretary of State will remember that the very first paragraph of the terms of reference of the Patten commission instructed that commission to

"bring forward proposals for future policing structures and arrangements, including means of encouraging widespread community support for those arrangements".

Does he realise that despite his euphemistic language, my right hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble)—the leader of the Ulster Unionist party—is absolutely right to say that what has been announced today degrades, demeans and denigrates an honourable force that has stood four-square between the law-abiding community—the greater number of people in Northern Ireland—and the terrorists for the past 30 years? Can I suggest to the Secretary of State that it is misleading of him to suggest that the changes that are taking place have anything to do with the Belfast agreement or with anything that my party assented to within the terms of that agreement?

[Mr. Ken Maginnis]

May I remind the Secretary of State that his predecessor, on her first visit as Secretary of State to Northern Ireland, made the dangerous promise that she would change the nature of the RUC? Is the right hon. Gentleman prepared to admit that the preparations for Patten were carried out by the Chief Constable when he was Deputy Chief Constable and brought forward his fundamental review? Furthermore, does the Secretary of State accept that many of the points in that fundamental review were quite acceptable to the majority of people and would have found widespread community support if they had not been changed and corrupted by the Patten commission, and if those issues had not been endorsed by the Government?

It appears that there were two major objectives of the Government's plans. One was to change the name of the RUC, and I have dealt with that. The other was to ensure that the RUC would be able to recruit from both traditions within Northern Ireland—something that my party wholeheartedly supports. However, is the Secretary of State suggesting that we should create district police partnerships, in which the scum of parochial politics—the Mr. McElduffs and Mr. Conways—will participate?

In case people do not know who Mr. McElduff and Mr. Conway are, I should point out that Mr. McElduff has campaigned against a senior Roman Catholic cleric, Monsignor Denis Faul, who has tried to interface with the RUC on behalf of the community with which he works. If Mr. McElduff and his like are prepared to take on Monsignor Denis Faul and to ask the archbishop to remove him as parish priest in Carrickmoor, what are they likely to do to 18 and 19-year-old young men and women whom the Secretary of State and I want to join the RUC?

The intimidation will continue because although the Secretary of State has proposed that the name of the RUC be changed, one thing has not changed—the name of Sinn Fein-IRA. Those people continue to organise and to be armed. They continue to ride on the backs of the entire community and, as Monsignor Faul has said, specifically the Roman Catholic tradition in Northern Ireland—

Madam Speaker: Order. I understand fully the strong feelings on this issue, but I have a lot of business today to safeguard. The Secretary of State has let the House know that there will be areas of legislation on which speeches will be made. With respect to the House, today is not the time to make speeches—it is the time to question the statement made by the Secretary of State. I have so far called only three other Members to question the statement. I hope that those whom I wish to call will be brisk in putting their question and, likewise, that the Secretary of State will be brisk in answering. This cannot go on, as we have so much more business to conduct this afternoon. Will the hon. Gentleman come to his point?

Mr. Maginnis: I am grateful, Madam Speaker, that you recognise the sensitivity of the issue. This concerns the future of law and order in Northern Ireland, as I am sure the Secretary of State will agree. He talked about human rights, but can he tell us whether there will be any human rights training for those two members of Sinn Fein-IRA who will be on the police board? How will the Secretary of State find hundreds of millions of pounds to create the package he has promised, when last week he could not provide the £5 million overtime money requested by the Chief Constable? Is the Secretary of State disappointed that the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), in his contribution, did not encourage members of his tradition to join the RUC?

Mr. Mandelson: I think that it would be best if I responded to three specific points that the hon. Gentleman raised, rather than responding in kind to the rhetoric that he offered and that, on mature reflection, he might like to reconsider.

Mr. Maginnis: I am not a betrayer.

Mr. Mandelson: The hon. Gentleman has said to me many times in the past that he compliments me on what I have said about the RUC, that he welcomes statements I have made in support of the RUC, and that he is glad of the stand that I have made for the RUC since I became Secretary of State. Therefore, I am surprised that he chooses to say something different in public from what he has said to me in private.

On the three specific points, it is true that the decisions I am announcing today stand alone on their own merits and independently from the Good Friday agreement. I intend that the reform of the police in Northern Ireland will continue, whatever cloud happens to gather over the institutions of the Good Friday agreement.

As for the district police partnerships, there is no question of any member of any district police partnership being able to exercise any improper influence, let alone control, over any aspect of police operations or any individual member of the police in that district. As far as human rights training is concerned, each member of the police board will be subject to the same strictures and expectations as every member of the police service of Northern Ireland.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): There are only two collective areas to which the George Cross has ever been issued—one is Malta and the other is the RUC. Malta was proud to call itself Malta GC. I understand from what my right hon. Friend has said that, in 2001, the Northern Ireland police force can be known as the Northern Ireland police force GC. That will be a continuing recognition of the work of the RUC into the future. I hope that Ulster Unionist Members will accept that the significance of the award of the George Cross to the RUC will continue to be recognised in the development of a police force that will service the whole community.

Mr. Mandelson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The George Cross was awarded by the Queen to the RUC in recognition of its success in leading a campaign against the most sustained onslaught of terrorism the developed world has ever seen. During that time, the RUC exhibited extraordinary courage, bravery and valour, and that will never cease to be associated with the RUC and also—I hope—with the police as a whole in Northern Ireland. The RUC and the Chief Constable are considering how the award of the George Cross can be recognised in perpetuity—I am certainly determined that it should be.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): On 9 September, when the Patten report was published, the Secretary of State's predecessor said:

"This report is about policing. As Chris Patten said, it is not about politics . . . It has been the RUC who have held the fabric of this society together over the past 30 years."

Against that background, can the Secretary of State share with the House the reactions at all levels of the RUC itself to these proposals, as the morale of that force is crucial to the future?

Mr. Mandelson: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the morale of the RUC is absolutely central to our continuing ability to combat terrorism, and crime in all its forms. I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for focusing on the question of morale.

I have never once visited Northern Ireland without meeting members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. I have done more than just meet them: I have sat down to discuss policing with groups of officers drawn from all ranks. That has happened on each and every occasion that I have made a visit.

I acknowledge that there is uncertainty in the RUC. There is some fear—

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): And hostility.

Mr. Mandelson: Among some individuals there is indeed hostility to the changes that are being made. However, it is equally true that there is a ready recognition in the RUC that change must come. Unfortunately, over the past 30 years, the police in Northern Ireland have acted as a security force. The force now has to change into a normal police service that polices Northern Ireland according to normal, peacetime terms.

Officers understand why change must come about, and readily accept and acknowledge that the extreme religious imbalance in the composition of the police in Northern Ireland is simply unsustainable. A normal, peacetime society cannot be policed by a force that is so extremely unrepresentative of the society that it serves. Therefore, although all RUC officers may not agree about the means that we are employing to overcome that imbalance, they certainly share our objectives. When they reflect on what we are proposing—and on the paucity of alternatives—many officers will come to accept that, painful and hurtful as they are, this change and these reforms are necessary.

Mr. Kevin McNamara (Hull, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is full support for the statement that he has made today among those on the Labour Benches? He has made a number of courageous and difficult decisions, and he deserves our party's support. However, is he also aware that large sections of the community in parts of Northern Ireland do not share the admiration for the Royal Ulster Constabulary expressed by many hon. Members today? Officers in the RUC who uphold the law impartially always deserve our support, but some officers have fallen short of that high ideal on many occasions. It should be recognised that that is one of the reasons for the changes announced today.

Will my right hon. Friend inform the House about the role of the new oversight commissioner? When can we expect the name of that person to be announced? Will the appointment require legislation, and what steps has my right hon. Friend taken to ensure that whoever is appointed has the full support of both communities and of the new Northern Ireland police service?

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his strong support of, and welcome for, what I have announced. His words will find an echo in crucial parts of Northern Ireland, and notably in the nationalist community.

In response to his specific question about the oversight commissioner, I can tell my hon. Friend that I do not believe that it will be necessary to wait for legislation to make appointment to the post. The search for that personality has already begun, and I believe that it will be possible to appoint someone who commands cross-community support. However, I want to stress that the responsibility of the oversight commissioner is to implement decisions taken by the Government. It will not be the commissioner's job to cut across the responsibilities of the Chief Constable, the Policing Board or the Secretary of State.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): I declare an interest. Like others hon. Members, I may owe my life to the professionalism and bravery of RUC officers.

While it is beyond argument that Northern Ireland needs a more broadly based police service, does the Secretary of State understand that many will object in principle to his decision to change the name? Many more will strongly object because they will suspect that he is doing it only to try to buy an element of peace from terrorists. To thwart that perception, will the Secretary of State agree to make the name change—if he is determined to go ahead with it—conditional on the acceptance of all the main aspects of the Good Friday agreement?

Mr. Mandelson: That linkage between the Patten recommendations and the Good Friday agreement would not be very welcome to all members of the Ulster Unionist party, for obvious reasons. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman is giving the objectives that I have set out a broad acceptance. There is no question of my having judged these issues on anything other than their strict merits—not for what they might or might not buy in return. I am simply not trading the future of the police in Northern Ireland in some sort of political marketplace. People may disagree with certain conclusions, and they may take issue with some of the details of what I have been saying, but I hope that they appreciate the sincerity of our objectives.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Will the Secretary of State acknowledge the excellent work of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs? Under the superb chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), it produced a report in July 1998 that was a useful signpost for the Patten commission.

Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the all-party group saw the need for significant reform of the RUC to make it more representative of the communities that it seeks to serve? Does he recognise that that principle was underpinned and endorsed by the people of Northern

[Mr. Martin Salter]

Ireland in the referendum on the Good Friday agreement? Does he recognise that the members of the Select Committee dealt with such controversial issues as the need to address the incompatibility of membership of sectarian organisations like the Orange Order and the Royal Ulster Constabulary? Finally, does my right hon. Friend regret that there is not more mature consideration across the Chamber of his response to the excellent work of the Patten commission?

Mr. Mandelson: When people consider the careful and sensitive way in which I am implementing a number of Chris Patten's recommendations over time, I think that they will focus more on what they welcome in my comments than on those things to which they object.

Of course I acknowledge the valuable contribution of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Its report was a significant milestone in considering these matters. I believe that the Patten commission extensively took into account the Select Committee's report, and quite right too.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Is the Secretary of State aware that the remit of the Patten commission was to produce proposals that would find broad acceptance and support throughout the entire community? Bearing in mind the fact that the pro-Union community produced a petition with more than 400,000 signatures—300,000 from Northern Ireland—and given the reaction of the elected representatives of that community, can it be said that the Patten proposals and the Government's decision to act on them can possibly be in accordance with the principle of widespread community support?

Is the Secretary of State aware that the Prime Minister and the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, now the Minister for the Cabinet Office, have repeatedly said that Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably linked? They cannot be severed. However, under the d'Hondt principle, these proposals would place on the supervising advisory board at least two members of a political party that is inextricably linked with one of the most ferocious—if not the most ferocious—terrorist organisations in western Europe. That is the board to which the Chief Constable will be accountable.

In relation to the comments that have been made on the award of the George Cross and the difficulties that will arise, is the Secretary of State aware that many members of the RUC believe that that award was made for political purposes? As one senior officer said, it was tantamount to a soldier being given the Victoria Cross on the first day of the Somme, and shot for dereliction of duty on the 10th day.

Mr. Mandelson: I shall leave it to the House to judge the final remark made by the hon. and learned Gentleman.

The hon. and learned Gentleman does not support the Good Friday agreement; he does not support the Executive; he does not support devolution; he does not support local decisions being taken by local people with local accents in Northern Ireland. He has made no contribution at all. No pain and no gain are experienced, given or received by the hon. and learned Gentleman.

The key point about the contribution made by the hon. and learned Gentleman is that, whenever he speaks against the Good Friday agreement and against local devolved responsibility in Northern Ireland, he never offers any alternative. He never suggests how we might achieve a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. He has been on form this afternoon, as usual.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): The background to the Patten report was based on one of the most extensive consultation and listening exercises undertaken in Northern Ireland. When Chris Patten reported, he said that the report must be considered as a package and not cherry-picked. He acknowledged that the changing of symbols would undoubtedly be controversial—crucially, some of the symbols that were about tradition and the past had to change. However, the report was not about disbanding the RUC, but transforming it.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in order to maintain and build trust and confidence in both communities, the most fitting and most lasting memorial that we can offer to the 302 officers who died and to the thousands who were injured is for all hon. Members of the House to play their part in ensuring that the reforms succeed?

Mr. Mandelson: I welcome my hon. Friend and his contribution in every sense of the term. He is right. The greatest disservice to the RUC would be for people to argue that there is no need for any change by that body, or for them to try to manipulate the emotions of the RUC family. That would only make the pain of the change all the worse. I hope that those who appear to be grandstanding—more for political effect than to give support to the members of the RUC family—will bear that very much in mind.

Mr. Michael Mates (East Hampshire): If the ultimate aim of all these changes is to produce a balanced police force, acceptable to all, that is an aim that I would certainly share with the Secretary of State. However, is he aware that, at the end of the day, this is not about names, symbols and emblems, offensive as the decisions on those have been to the majority community in Northern Ireland? It is actually about getting the IRA to stop intimidating members of the nationalist community to prevent them from joining a police service in which they can be identified.

If the Secretary of State has not had assurances from the likes of Mr. Adams and Mr. McGuinness that they will acknowledge that this is a new start, and that, as the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume) markedly did not say, the nationalist community must now be encouraged to join the new police service, all that he has done is to take another step down the road to appeasement of the terrorists.

Mr. Mandelson: There is no question of appeasing anyone. During my political career, I have not been known to be very willing to appease, or pander to, anyone. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about intimidation, but I think that the best way to ensure that that intimidation is isolated, rejected and overcome is to ensure that those who wish to join the police can do so in the knowledge that they have the consent and backing of their wider community. That is what is so important.

I have only just this afternoon announced the Government's conclusions and decisions on the implementation of the Patten report. People have hardly

had very long to reflect on what I have said. I hope that, when they do, their commitment will be great, and that we can successfully overcome whatever residual intimidation might linger in and around the nationalist community, so that we achieve the balanced and acceptable police service that the hon. Gentleman says that he supports.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Will my right hon. Friend find a way of expressing the fact that the normalisation of the police service is of immense benefit to the whole community of Northern Ireland, including the constituents of many Opposition Members who are fiercely antagonistic to these proposals? Will my right hon. Friend, in seeking to persuade people of the benefits of the proposals, emphasise that those members of the nationalist community of a strong disposition to peace nevertheless hardly ever regard it as natural for their offspring to enter the police service?

I speak as someone with relatives in the Province, in the nationalist community, and as someone who comes from a line of people, many of whose uncles made the police force in New York, Chicago and elsewhere. That family tradition never emerges in Northern Ireland, because we need a discontinuity. We have had an unnatural—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman heard Madam Speaker's comments. I should be grateful, and so would the whole House, if he would now put his question very briefly.

Mr. McWalter: Will my right hon. Friend ensure that that message about normalisation, about the importance of the name change, is taken on board? That is the real barrier to peace-loving nationalist people who refuse to countenance joining the police force.

Mr. Mandelson: A normal society in Northern Ireland is precisely what all hon. Members, of whatever party, are seeking to achieve—a normal society, in which people can go about their everyday lives without fear of bombs and barricades; a properly locally run, democratic society, in which there is not the high-profile security presence that many people find intimidating but that, for the time being, it is necessary and important to maintain, and a society in which there is a normal police service. Those are all different definitions and descriptions of the same thing—a normal society. It is into that state that Northern Ireland is now finally emerging. The decisions on the police that the Government have taken will assist, and not hinder, that further progress.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Will the Secretary of State accept that, to some of us, he has appeared to sign the death warrant of the most efficient, effective, professional and courageous police force in the world and has sold out lock, stock and barrel to the republican element and terrorism in Northern Ireland? To whom do many of those to whom the right hon. Gentleman has pandered with his bland words owe their loyalty? I am proud to be a member of the United Kingdom. Are those to whom he has pandered of the same view? Do they owe the same loyalty as I do?

Mr. Mandelson: The whole point of the peaceful environment that we are creating in Northern Ireland and the political dispensation that is emerging there is that people are able to live as Unionists—proud of their Britishness and continuing as part of the United Kingdom—alongside others who have a different nationalist aspiration. It is to find coexistence and harmony between the two traditions that the Good Friday agreement was created in the first place. I am afraid that I do not accept in one respect what the hon. Gentleman said about the police service in Northern Ireland. Yes, the RUC is efficient and it has won successfully a war against terrorism in Northern Ireland. However, if it is to remain as effective in the future as it has been in the past, it must also become representative of the society that it seeks to police. To achieve that representativeness and to enable the police to continue to be effective, we are implementing the decisions that I have announced.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made an announcement that maintains the momentum for the reform of the institutions of Northern Ireland. However, in the light of the photographs that were published this week of members of the Royal Irish Regiment parading with Orange Order banners, what proposals does he have for a review of the Royal Irish Regiment?

Mr. Mandelson: I have absolutely no proposals for a review of the Royal Irish Regiment. I look forward to home regiments continuing to be garrisoned in Northern Ireland in perpetuity. As for the photographs to which my hon. Friend referred, I am sure that they are a matter that relevant commanding officers and the General Officer Commanding will be willing to look into if my hon. Friend were to raise it with them.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): As a Minister in 1970 at the time of the previous review of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and as someone who owes his life to the RUC, I naturally feel emotional today. However, I accept that there have to be changes to policing in Northern Ireland. After 30 years, there must be changes.

Does the Secretary of State recognise that the Ulster Unionist party agrees with 70 or 80 per cent. of the Patten report? However, there is no doubt that the report landed the Secretary of State in a difficult situation and on a topic that will cause on-going debate for several months. Does he understand that Ulster Unionists agree that we must have more of the Roman Catholic community serving as police officers in Northern Ireland?

We agree that there must be training in human rights, not just for policemen but for members of police boards. We agree with the proposals for a police college and, of course, with the information technology proposals, but does the Secretary of State understand that all that could be achieved without changing the name of the RUC, a force that has served Northern Ireland and the whole of the United Kingdom well. Will he also tell us for how many years the oversight commissioner will be in office? Will the 50:50 proposal for enrolment of new officers into the police system in Northern Ireland contravene fair employment legislation? Will the 50:50 proportions apply to part-time members as well?

Mr. Mandelson: The right hon. Gentleman makes a special contribution to this debate because he was a casualty of the terrorist war that the RUC fought and

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finally won. His contribution therefore has considerable weight. I am grateful to him for saying that the overwhelming bulk of the changes proposed by Patten, which we are agreeing to today, commands the support of all sections of society from both traditions in Northern Ireland.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman, with all genuine respect, that I do not agree, and cannot accept, that, if we failed to change the RUC's name, it would simply be possible to wait indefinitely for people from the nationalist community to join the police. I do not believe that it would happen. If I thought that there was any way that we could have made those changes and transformed the composition of the police in Northern Ireland without changing the name, I would have done it.

On the basis of all my contacts, my conversations, my research and my exposure to opinion in the nationalist community, I do not accept that nationalists or Catholics in Northern Ireland would join a police service that continued to be called the RUC. Frankly, they associate that name with Unionism and the British state. They accept that the principle of consent is enshrined in the Good Friday agreement, but they also have a nationalist identity and aspiration, and those must be made compatible with their desire to join the police service. I am afraid that a change in the name is a necessary condition for that.

Mr. Taylor: What about part-timers?

Mr. Mandelson: On the specific question of the part-time reservists, I shall write to the right hon. Gentleman.

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement of the centrality of human rights to the reform of the police. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Conservative Members seem to find that funny. It is a radical move that should be extended.

Does my right hon. Friend recall that the Select Committee, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) referred earlier, found that one of the major impediments to the retention of police from the Catholic community was the wider canteen culture that remains prevalent within the RUC? Will there be measures, alongside the new quotas that are proposed, to ensure that recruits from the Catholic community—who will increase from the current figure of 8 per cent.—will be retained and trained appropriately?

Mr. Mandelson: I readily accept my hon. Friend's point. RUC training is the best and the most rigorous of any police service in the world, and those standards will continue when the new police service is created.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I spent about a year working closely with the RUC, and I patrolled the streets of Northern Ireland with Catholic and Protestant officers. I wholeheartedly support the Secretary of State in his desire to get more Catholics into the police force. Everybody does.

Why has the right hon. Gentleman ignored the evidence of his own Department from April 1988, which said that the main reason given by Catholics for not joining the RUC is that they

"fear intimidation or attack on themselves or their relatives"?

Why instead—this question has been asked before—has he given way to the demands of Sinn Fein-IRA and as a result is allowing the very people who have attacked and intimidated police officers to have their way? He is giving way to those who have sustained the terror campaign of which he spoke earlier.

Mr. Mandelson: If I were meeting the demands of Sinn Fein-IRA, I would be disbanding the RUC, because that is what they want and have demanded. They have made a string of demands that are completely unacceptable—they were unacceptable to the Patten commission and remain unacceptable to the Government. I readily acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's experience and knowledge, but I repeat that the use of words or symbols perceived to associate the police with one side of the constitutional argument has an effect. Their use is an inhibiting factor that discourages people from joining the police, over and above any form or degree of intimidation. We have to recognise that. In an effort to overcome it, we support the changes that I have described this afternoon.

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): I thank the Secretary of State for his announcement, which gives a precis of the way forward for policing. I am sure that he agrees that today is an important day for Northern Ireland. The changes will enable us to have a police force that commands the respect of all the community—I say "all" advisedly. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman agrees that, to underpin the peace that we have, it is absolutely essential that both the actuality and the symbolism of the new police service is readily acceptable to both communities.

I should like to place it on record that the Social Democratic and Labour party, which represents the vast majority of nationalists in Northern Ireland, expresses our deep regret over the deaths of RUC members who have been murdered, and our sympathy with their families, who continue to grieve, and with those families who have suffered maimings or killings. We have put that on record many times before, even in our written response to Patten.

Having said that, I find it sad that those sacrifices are being used almost as a political weapon to prevent progress. That is most regrettable. I am sure that, in his travels around Northern Ireland and conversations with members of the RUC, the right hon. Gentleman has, like me, found that they welcome change—the vast majority of them want it. They want to be acceptable and to walk in safety in our communities. The only way to achieve that is through the Patten proposals, accepted by the Secretary of State, which will create a force that is acceptable to both sides.

I am sure the right hon. Gentleman agrees that the best interpreters of the will and attitudes of the nationalist community are its representatives. Much of the blame for

the bipartisan situation surrounding the RUC lies with Opposition Members from Northern Ireland referring to that force as their police force, their men—theirs, not the communities'. There are many instances of that being true: we all remember Bombay street and Hooker street, and the RUC B-specials burning down one street after another. That remains in our folk memory. We must have impartial symbols and attitudes if we are to underpin a new service and the peace, and thereby prevent—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must have heard my earlier comment, so will he please now bring his question to a quick conclusion?

Mr. McGrady: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Does the Secretary of State agree that it is absolutely essential that the symbolism, as well as the actuality, of reform is carried through, so that the full support of both communities can be gained?

Mr. Mandelson: Obviously, I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's remarks. It is notable that he and other leaders of the SDLP have readily and generously associated themselves with tributes to the sacrifices made by the RUC during the past 30 years. I am grateful to him for repeating that this afternoon.

It is unfortunate that certain individual—probably maverick—Unionist spokesmen have in the past 24 hours referred to the RUC in a way that suggests that the police service literally belongs to Unionists in Northern Ireland. I am glad to say that no Member of the House has done that, but other Unionist spokesmen have. It is as if they are saying, "You can do anything you like in Northern Ireland as long as you keep your hands off our police force." It is precisely that sort of attitude and statement that confirms people's worst suspicions. I am glad to say that it is thoroughly unrepresentative of mainstream Unionist opinion and of the leadership of the Ulster Unionist party.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman's support will be forthcoming for the changes that I have announced, and will be followed by an encouragement of his supporters and those from his community to join the new Northern Ireland police service. I cannot predict better than the Chief Constable himself, when he said:

"If these recommendations"—

referring to the Patten report—

"bring about a new beginning for policing, the pain that my colleagues and friends are being asked to endure becomes a pain that they have to endure for the greater gain".

That "greater gain" is a representative police service in Northern Ireland, one that has cross-community support and that nationalists finally join. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues will be encouraging them in that direction.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the immense contribution made by the Royal Ulster Constabulary in maintaining law and order in Northern Ireland and in fighting terrorism throughout the United Kingdom?

Given what the right hon. Gentleman has said about district policing partnership boards, will he give an undertaking to the House that any legislation that he brings forward will not contain powers that would enable those boards to employ terrorists, as recommendation 32 of the Patten report would make possible?

Mr. Mandelson: The right hon. and learned Gentleman either was not here or did not hear what I said in my opening statement. Possibly he was here, in which case I apologise to him. I said that I was not at this stage going to proceed with those aspects of the role of the Director of Public Prosecutions in relation to community policing and the expenditure of moneys for those projects to which he has referred. That remains the position.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I appreciate that this is a very important matter. However, it is one to which the House will be returning in due course. We have spent a long time on the statement and, to preserve the rest of the business, we must move on.

Points of Order

4.53 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on a procedural matter relating to the proposal to deal with the Disqualifications Bill next Monday and Tuesday. I know that that has not yet been confirmed by the Leader of the House, but I seek your advice, given that the proposal is, as I understand it, that there will be Second Reading on Monday followed by all remaining stages the following day. That appears to present consider difficulty to hon. Members in the tabling of amendments. Will you advise me and the rest of the House on how we can go about tabling amendments to a highly controversial Bill? Is there a way in which you or Madam Speaker can help hon. Members in the tabling of amendments, given the extraordinarily and, in my view, unacceptably short time that is being proposed between Second Reading of a controversial Bill and the remaining stages, which will be dealt with the very next day? I would appreciate your help and guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Madam Speaker has asked me to let it be known that she understands the right hon. Gentleman's problem. The selection of amendments in Committee is likely to be for the Chairman of Ways and Means but, in the absence of any order to permit the tabling of amendments before Second Reading, Madam Speaker is sure that the Chairman of Ways and Means will be sympathetic to starred amendments.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Did you notice that, in the debate this afternoon, which lasted a considerable time, only one woman Member was fortunate enough to be called? I raise the matter because, in Northern Ireland, women's voices are not easily heard, and I should be grateful if, in future, the Speaker's Office would take that point on board.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Lady appreciates that Madam Speaker and the Deputy Speakers are entirely fair in selecting hon. Members, whether they are male or female. The hon. Lady made the point herself when she referred to a debate. It was, in fact, a statement, but it verged on a debate.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I appreciate the difficulties to which you referred, but I want to put it on record that the capital city of Northern Ireland, Belfast, had one representative in the Chamber, who was not called. It is the largest area of the Province, and the hon. Member representing it has served for the past year with the Royal Ulster Constabulary in a parliamentary police scheme.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's point, but I am sure that he, too, will understand that we spent an extremely long time on the statement. We have other business to deal with, and we must move on.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Further to an earlier point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on next week's business. Surely it is the usual procedure of the House not only to allow time between Second Reading and final stages, but between Committee and Report stages. They all seem to be rolled into one on the Disqualifications Bill. How on earth can we discuss it during Committee stage and table amendments for the remaining stages later on the same day? That does not make sense.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: There is no strict rule of the House, as the hon. Gentleman implies. I cannot add to my earlier comments.

Community Protection (Airport Noise and Pollution)

4.57 pm

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require airport operators to reduce operational noise and pollution levels in consultation with local authorities and communities near airports; to enable local authorities to enforce noise and pollution mitigation agreements; to involve communities near airports in the shaping of balanced planning frameworks controlling the operation of those airports; and for related purposes.

There is little effective legislation to control the levels of noise and pollution generated by aircraft and airports. Indeed, the Environmental Protection Act 1990 specifically exempts aircraft noise and emissions from the general nuisance controls that it contains, irrespective of whether an airfield is small and unlicensed or a major national airport.

Tranquillity and air quality are environmental Cinderellas, whose interests have been continually damaged by their ugly sisters, noise and pollution. The aim of my Bill is to give much needed protection to airport communities against the incessant noise and growing pollution that they daily endure.

No hon. Member who has a sizeable airport in or near his or her constituency will be unaware of the impact on the local economy. The industry estimates a contribution of £10 billion to the United Kingdom's gross domestic product, and half a million direct and indirect jobs. Only last month, the number of jobs generated by East Midlands airport in north-west Leicestershire went through the 5,000 barrier, and numbers are still rising rapidly.

Nevertheless, the aviation industry tends to overplay its future economic potential. It is apparent that the successful and expanding businesses of the new century are more likely to depend on smart communication systems than on the physical movement of goods, which characterised the industries of the past century.

As with all economic activity, aviation has an environmental downside, which needs to be tackled in the interests of sustainability. As the number of air travellers has grown and the volumes of freight moved have increased, the loss of open countryside, higher pollution levels and the perpetual noise intrusion are the price being paid by the many thousands of people living around and on the flight paths to the nation's airports.

It is in no one's interest to ignore the increasingly widespread anxieties about the environmental impact of air travel. For too long, aircraft noise and air pollution have had a seriously adverse effect on the quality of life of hundreds of airport communities. Projected new laws by the previous Government were shelved time and again. That must not continue. The time is right for the Government to act, and the Bill includes some suggestions for action.

I welcome today's introduction by the Government of a national air quality strategy and I support their existing commitment to drawing up a 30-year airports policy, about which consultation begins soon. However, I urge the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to widen the brief to devise a comprehensive air transport policy.

There is already a specific target of expanding regional airports to take the pressure off the south-east—from where two thirds of passengers fly and where three quarters of airline and airport jobs are located. However, any such expansion should be accompanied—or, indeed, preceded—by a far more effective regulatory framework spelling out the rights and responsibilities of airports, planners and local communities.

All that is underpinned by the pressing need for the Government to accept that there are limits to the number of aircraft movements that the system can tackle and the effects that communities can tolerate. In short, we should abandon the predict-and-provide principle, which has seriously flawed our air transport planning for a generation. We must also abandon the stock DETR belief that the current local plan process is adequate for resolving airport issues. It is not and does not.

Using a projected average annual growth rate of 6 per cent. in demand for flights would lead, over the 30-year strategy period, to a tripling in size of every regional airport. Down that nightmare flight path lies an environmental disaster of unimaginable proportions for already beleaguered airport communities. Air travel and air freight are significant players in our economy. They must be allowed to grow, but only in a responsible and responsive way.

A key principle in environmental policy formulation is that the polluter must pay. However, the aviation industry seems to be excluded from that. It allows—even requires—the wider society and economy to bear the burden of its environmental costs. The aeroplane is the most polluting form of transport, and is responsible for around 10 per cent. of all greenhouse gas emissions, yet it is exempt from tax on its kerosene fuel. That problem requires urgent, Europe-wide action.

Airport communities are almost powerless to protect their quality of life against excessive airport noise and must often rely on the good will of their powerful and important neighbour. However, business pressures are such that any voluntary codes of conduct can steadily become ineffective and unsustainable.

The focus of the Bill is raising airports' operating standards, especially in relation to noise limitation. Apart from the designated airports of Heathrow, Stansted and Gatwick, which are subject to specific noise legislation, all the others depend on the lottery of local agreements. The Bill would superimpose a minimum framework, which specified common and enforceable limits that airports would have to observe for renewed Civil Aviation Authority licensing. Those limits would not be part of a voluntary agreement, or reluctantly conceded for planning permission, and they would not lack independent means of monitoring and verification. They would be part of a comprehensive deal, which would aim to protect the quality of life of airport communities.

What needs to be contained in the framework? A prime requirement is the financing and installation by the airport of an appropriate noise monitoring system, relevant to the pattern of noise that it generates. The system would have to be managed independently, with penalties for operators who violated noise, route and other restrictions. The proceeds would be distributed to local organisations by an independent local panel.

Secondly, the airport, local authorities and airport communities would collectively agree noise-preferential routes, especially for departing aircraft, with appropriate

[Mr. David Taylor]

restrictions on turning and overflying. Comprehensive mandatory pilots notes on the agreed local regime would have to be produced and incorporated into relevant publications.

Thirdly, there would be a collective agreement about seasonal night flying quotas, with a complete ban on chapter II aircraft, whether hushkitted or not, and on chapter III aircraft above a specified weight, as the heavier ones can be even noisier than the older aircraft that they replace. Fourthly, an independent executive forum of airport owners, operators, local authorities and community groups would monitor and try to resolve any airport environmental problems.

Finally, the framework would include a range of provisions such as ground running, property soundproofing, complaint logging, public safety zones and control of further development.

The patchwork quilt of regulatory bodies means that a national approach is needed to obtain higher environmental standards for all airports. The comprehensive action needed for noise and pollution mitigation has to be part of a national aviation policy, which is itself the basis of discussion with international aviation bodies and other Governments. Technological and operational measures alone will never obtain that limitation of aircraft noise and disturbance levels which is so necessary for so many people.

My Bill is a meaningful, reasonable and enforceable measure that would produce a more satisfactory framework within which airport operation and development could occur. It would provide a level runway for airports so that they could raise standards in parallel with their competitors and improve relations with the people affected by their operations. It spells out to local planning authorities an unambiguous and enforceable regime based on environmental considerations and would achieve a better balance between commercial airport needs and legitimate local requirements. Finally, it offers to airport communities no less than an environmental charter to control the noise and pollution generated by the aerial motorway over their homes. I therefore commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. David Taylor, Liz Blackman, Mr. Colin Burgon, Mr. Jim Cunningham, Mrs. Janet Dean, Mr. Paul Flynn, Judy Mallaber, Mr. John McDonnell, Dr. Nick Palmer, Mr. Andrew Reed, Mr. Gareth R. Thomas and Mr. Mark Todd.

COMMUNITY PROTECTION (AIRPORT NOISE AND POLLUTION)

Mr. David Taylor accordingly presented a Bill to require airport operators to reduce operational noise and pollution levels in consultation with local authorities and communities near airports; to enable local authorities to enforce noise and pollution mitigation agreements; to involve communities near airports in the shaping of balanced planning frameworks controlling the operation of those airports; and for related purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 July, and to be printed [Bill 48].

Orders of the Day

Representation of the People Bill

As amended in the Committee, considered.

New Clause 1

REGULATIONS UNDER SCHEDULE 2 TO THE 1983 ACT

'. (1) The Secretary of State shall publish in draft any provisions he intends to make by regulations under paragraphs 10, 11 and 13 of Schedule 2 to the 1983 Act as amended by section 9 of this Act and shall consult such persons and bodies as appear to him to have an interest in the operation of those provisions.

(2) No regulations making provisions under paragraphs 10, 11 and 13 of Schedule 2 to the 1983 Act shall be made by the Secretary of State until three months have elapsed from the date of the publication of the draft provisions referred to in subsection (1) above.'.—*[Mr. Greenway.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

5.7 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

May I remind hon. Members, out of courtesy, of my interest in the Institute of Sales Promotion? The institute has no particular interest in the Bill, but I would not want any hon. Member to think that I had been in any way discourteous, even though aspects of this matter affect marketing in a way quite separate from my own interest.

As recently as last Thursday, a Committee of the whole House discussed in some detail the vexed issue of the inclusion of an opt-out box on electoral registration forms: how that would be achieved; how voters would be made aware of the effect of ticking such a box by a leaflet explaining what that would mean and, more important, of the availability of a full and an edited register to various organisations for various purposes, including uses that could best be described as commercial. We had a fruitful and constructive debate. Some progress was made and the Under-Secretary kindly informed us that he was persuaded of the case for including credit referencing as one of the legitimate purposes for which the full register should be available.

Less than a week—a brief period—has elapsed, but I make no criticism because that is the way in which our proceedings sometimes work, and given the pressures of business, one understands why. Nevertheless, we felt that it was pertinent and proper to revisit the issue on Report to test some things further with the Minister and—more to the point, for reasons that I shall explain—to include something further in the Bill.

As I have said, the Bill provides for the commercial sale of both the full and edited registers. Thanks to amendment No. 21, to which the Minister kindly agreed, there is a clear requirement to explain to voters on both registers the consequences of ticking any opt-out box. However, the Bill does not clarify or indicate in any way which organisations will and will not have access to either register—or, indeed, for what purposes they will have such access on payment of whatever fees and under whatever licensing arrangements are to be enshrined in regulations, none of which is in the Bill.

I should make it abundantly clear that, in moving the new clause, the Opposition are in no way suggesting that we are not prepared to take on trust the Minister's commitment to

further consultation, which is welcome. We entirely accept that the hon. Gentleman is willing to consult, and will continue to consult. Our concerns are different: several very important questions remain to be answered.

First, ideally, consultation before the Report stage should have been more extensive and comprehensive. The working party on electoral reform, whose report the Government are seeking to implement, was published, following the recommendations in July, only in late October. Meaningful consultation on the effects and implications for many commercial organisations and our constituents took place only after the Government signalled their intention to have an opt-out box and published the Bill. The Minister's promise to consult, which we take at face value—it is entirely right—implies clear acknowledgement that consultation thus far has been less than adequate to resolve all the issues. This is a complex matter and such issues will take some time to resolve.

Secondly, we must ask whether the Minister's mind is fully made up on the question of access and use for commercial interests. Has he decided which organisations or types of organisation may have access to the full register, and for what purpose?

The Minister's response in letters and replies to some of my questions in Committee last week is not completely clear. In a letter to the chief executive of the Direct Marketing Association, Mr. Colin Lloyd, on 12 January—I pointed this out in an intervention on him in Committee—the Minister said:

"The full version will only be made available for electoral purposes, for law enforcement and crime prevention and in connection with applications for credit."

However, in direct response to my question on whether the letter was the final, definitive statement on who will have access to the register, he said:

"we want to ensure that all interests are taken into account."

He went on to say:

"It is our intention that the full register shall not be completely available to the direct marketing industry."

5.15 pm

I do not know whether the Under-Secretary or his officials had a chance to edit whatever he said or meant to say, but his statement is ambiguous. One interpretation is that the industry will not be allowed the full register, and another is that it will be allowed the full register but that that register will not be available for all kinds of commercial uses. So, there is a doubt.

Later in last week's proceedings in Committee, however, the Minister appeared to reaffirm the point made in his letter when he said:

"The full register will be available for law enforcement and crime prevention purposes, which include money laundering and fraud protection checks. We have invited the financial industry to consider the best way in which to facilitate that."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 460-3.].

That appears unambiguous.

Only two conclusions can be drawn from the Minister's responses: either he has made up his mind, in which case we must wonder what the promised consultation is for, or he remains open to change and further argument. Has he signed off his policy and come to a final position on the use to which the full register will be put for commercial purposes, so that further consultation will not change his mind? If that were the case, such consultation would be pointless, except to allow—this is what he may have meant—for continuing discussion on the use of the edited register, the leaflet and the fee and licensing arrangements for which the regulations will provide. All those things are extremely important, but none of the consultation would address the central issue of whether the full register should be commercially available to interests other than the four that he set out in his letter to the chief executive of the Direct Marketing Association.

If that is not so, might the Minister still be persuaded to widen the scope of the full register's use? We rather hope so, as do many commercial interests in both direct marketing and other organisations—including, still, many financial institutions.

Given that the Bill has reached such an advanced stage, the position is unsatisfactory. In agreeing Third Reading, we must consider whether the Bill is satisfactory—and whatever the Minister's reply, my comments suggest that it is not. If policy is settled, why are the provisions not more explicit? Alternatively, why do we not have draft regulations to consider?

In the Standing Committee considering the Freedom of Information Bill, we have been discussing constructively the fact that much of that legislation will be enacted through regulations. The Minister has confirmed the advanced state of drafting of those regulations, for which I commend him. Indeed, as he knows, in Standing Committee B yesterday, I expressed some surprise that the process was so advanced. That only fuels my argument that if the policy is settled we should have had the opportunity to consider draft regulations in conjunction with Third Reading.

We can only conclude that this Bill has been rushed. We said that on Second Reading, as recently as 30 November. To be charitable, we understand the urgency with which the Government want to hold trials of different ways of conducting elections and their desire to be ready by the spring. We understand that that was the purpose of the working party and we appreciate the fact that the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, whose interest in the Bill we commend—we are glad to see him here—has put in a great deal of work.

We also understand the Government's desire for consensus, but my central point on the opt-out box is that the issue is in no way ready for Parliament to approve. Even if the rest of the Bill is satisfactory—and we have other concerns that we will raise later—clause 9, in our judgment, is not. That is why we have begun our debate on Report with this issue.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): My hon. Friend was taking me with him until he said that he understood the reason for the urgency and seemed to offer his support for it. For the life of me, I cannot see what is urgent about this. I suggest the opposite: there can never be anything urgent about making radical, experimental changes to electoral law. I hope that my hon. Friend was not suggesting that he endorsed any spurious urgency that the Government have attached to the measure.

Mr. Greenway: My right hon. Friend puts me in some difficulty, so I will pour myself a glass of water and pause for thought.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Whisky, John.

Mr. Greenway: Alcoholic beverages are reserved for the Chancellor, I think, and his day is coming soon.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) must understand that our party, to which we are absolutely committed, had a representative on a working party that made recommendations about changes in electoral arrangements. We have considered whether it is sensible to accept the recommendation that there should be pilot schemes in respect of different ways of voting, on different days and with different procedures. *[Interruption.]* I hope that my right hon. Friend is listening, because what I have to say is important to him, given his constituency.

The Greater London Authority Act 1999 allows for changes in voting in the Greater London Assembly elections. Parliament has already approved that. If this Bill is enacted, it will allow similar experiments to take place in other parts of the country. I do not happen to have local elections in my constituency this spring, but many others do.

I do not want my right hon. Friend to think that we do not have concerns about other elements of the Bill. The fact that we have tabled amendments on issues such as the local connection declaration—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman has allowed himself to be tempted away from the new clause. Perhaps he can return to it.

Mr. Greenway: I was about to do that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I was simply going to say that we have concerns about other aspects of the Bill and have tabled amendments accordingly, and I am sure that hon. Members will seek to catch your eye to express their views on them.

We have tabled the new clause because we believe that the opt-out box provision is the most unsatisfactory part of the Bill, and that it has nothing to do with the main thrust of the recommendations on the introduction of rolling registers or changes in the conduct of elections, which is what the working party was really about.

We have all been sent on a wild goose chase that has nothing to do with the central requirement of the working party to examine our electoral procedures. Had the provision been put in any other Bill, it would not have been rushed as it has been; there would have been much more time for consultation with industry; and we would have had a much more settled position for Parliament to consider on Report and Third Reading than is the case tonight.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I want to add to the interesting comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). My hon. Friend is keen to co-operate, but just because some of us do not approve of the way in which the elections for the mayor of London are to be conducted, there is no reason why we should have two lots of elections carried out in the wrong way. An equivalent argument is that, if I beat my wife, that is no reason for my Front-Bench colleague to beat his.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) responds, he should be aware that that intervention, too, was well wide of the new clause. I would be grateful if he would deal with that.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I would simply remind my hon. Friend that there was an experiment on proportional representation in elections last June in which the Government got a bloody nose, as a result of which their excitement over, and enthusiasm for, PR has been greatly diminished. I ask my hon. Friend not to anticipate the outcome of the pilots, which may not be—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have no wish to keep interrupting the hon. Gentleman's flow, but I will do so increasingly firmly unless he returns to the new clause.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We think that clause 9 is not satisfactory, but the provisions are not central to what the Government are trying to do in the Bill. But for the urgency of the provisions, it is doubtful whether the Minister would be seeking approval for the clause, given the uncertain outcome of so many key interests of importance to our constituents. He has already acknowledged—at column 458 on Thursday—that the House should debate the matter again.

The Minister also says that he wants further consultation, and we do not doubt his word, but we think that it is not unreasonable in all the circumstances to reflect the incomplete nature of clause 9 by including in the Bill both the case for, and a commitment to, further meaningful consultation. That, in a nutshell, is what new clause 1 would do. We also want adequate time to be provided for these matters to be considered—and for representations to be made by those affected, both in industry and as individuals—before Parliament is asked to approve the regulations giving effect to the final outcome of those consultations.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will my hon. Friend confirm what is not in the new clause but may be implicit in his thinking behind it—namely, that the minimum three-month period would apply only to periods during which Parliament was sitting? Secondly—and, I think, importantly—in view of Lord Falkland's wise adage that that which it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change, does he agree that the consultation that he seeks through new clause 1 should be wide, detailed, academic and, preferably, protracted?

Mr. Greenway: Even on his birthday, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is razor sharp. I am sure that we wish him many happy returns. We are all the better for having him here. He makes his own point extremely well, but I want to reflect a little further on what he said. Part of the problem is that the consultations often take place over four or five weeks during the holiday period. I am not entirely sure that Parliament needs to be sitting when consultations take place with industry, as we have a lengthy recess in the summer and autumn.

In drafting the new clause, we initially thought that the consultation period might be six months, but that would be unprecedented. Three months is normal for draft regulations and arrangements to be consulted on with interested parties. Three months would give ample time to bring the matter to the attention of even those hon. Members who take the longest holidays during the recess—this does not apply to my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham, who attends to all his duties with considerable care—and would allow for proper consultation.

5.30 pm

Before concluding, let me draw the attention of the House to three other issues related to this matter that remain outstanding from Thursday's debate. First, I ask the Minister again to consider the use of the full register for debt recovery. We understand that the effect of what the hon. Gentleman has thus far agreed is that credit referencing agencies will have access to the full register to assist them in advising financial institutions on whether to grant credit. That is an important agreement because it in part tackles the concerns of many hon. Members on both sides of the House about the risk and danger of social exclusion that would arise from the opt-out box and the creation of an edited register. It seems extraordinary that the Minister can conclude that the use of the full register for such credit referencing would be legitimate while its use to assist with debt recovery would not. I want the hon. Gentleman to revisit that issue in his reply.

Secondly, I asked the Minister what research his Department had undertaken into the use of the raw data in the electoral register as the sole source of names and addresses for sending unsolicited mail. He says that such mail is the main source of complaint to electoral registration offices—I think that the working party made some comment to that effect. Our understanding is that the data on the electoral register are seldom used in such a way—they are seldom the only source of names and addresses of persons to whom literature may be sent. They are more widely used as a source to verify data obtained by some other means. It follows that if the register is not to be available in any way to the direct marketing industry and those commercial organisations, they will not be able to verify and up-date their data. The consequence will be that the volume of junk mail will rise.

If electoral registration officers are already receiving complaints about the volume of unsolicited mail because people perceive that the senders obtained their names and addresses from the register—we think that that is a false perception, but it is none the less a valid one—the Minister must consider what will happen if the amount of junk mail increases. The complaints will rise and the position will get worse.

Also, if the letter to Colin Lloyd, the chief executive of the Direct Marketing Association, is a settled policy, can the Minister tell us why no new regulatory impact assessment has been carried out? There has been no such assessment of those aspects of the provisions.

Thirdly, and finally, the Minister said that direct marketing firms would not have access to the full register, as that would conflict with the European Union data protection directive. How can the directive allow credit referencing, but not screening for unsolicited mail, or indeed, use of the register by charities? Also, it appears that only Home Office officials and the Data Protection Registrar gave evidence to the working party on data protection. Before the Minister closes his mind on the subject, would he be willing to receive a paper from the Direct Marketing Association and the CBI as they have a contrary view?

I have looked in detail at the submission of the Data Protection Registrar to the working party, and it is hardly conclusive. On the contrary, the registrar's advice appears to confirm that, provided that voters are advised of the fact, their data could be used for other purposes. In her submission, the registrar states:

> "Even if such a case can be made in relation to some purposes individuals should still have a choice over the sale of their data for other purposes particularly the compilation of direct marketing lists".

Far from the registrar confirming that direct marketing use of the full register was incompatible with the data protection directive, which is enshrined in the Data Protection Act 1998, in the summary of her advice to the working party, she clearly sets out the circumstances in which it would be compatible. That is another reason for us to conclude that much of this provision has not been thought through.

I do not want to detain the House further, and must reassure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I did not intend to speak at length. I have taken interruptions that have led us to stray from the key point of the new clause. I hope that what I have said demonstrates that there are far too many unresolved issues in relation to clause 9 for the House to be satisfied with how matters stand. Yes, let there be consultation—we welcome the Minister's comments on that and I suspect he will further reassure us later on his willingness to consult—but Parliament must continue to have a role. New clause 1 makes that role and our interest in and attention to the matter more likely than if we leave the Bill as it stands. I commend the new clause to the House.

Mr. Forth: I am sure that you will advise me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that this is not the occasion for me to tell the House that the fact that a colleague of mine apparently served on some obscure working party commits me in any way. I am sure that you would advise me that Third Reading would be the time for me to tell the House why I feel in no way bound by a colleague who, unbeknown to me, conspires with the Government in a working party to give this measure a spurious urgency that I do not understand and that has not yet been explained to me. Those points will come later and I cannot wait for Third Reading to make them. I hope that it will not be too long before we reach Third Reading because I am dying to make that speech.

This is the occasion for us to concentrate our thoughts narrowly on clause 9 and the new clause moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway).

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): The right hon. Gentleman says that, according to the Government, he seems to have been committed to the measure by a member of the Conservative party. The Ulster Unionist party was not committed to it by anyone because we were

[Mr. William Ross]

not represented on the working party. Furthermore, I should think that we are the party in the House that knows most about fraud.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said that he could not wait for Third Reading. I am afraid that he will have to do so.

Mr. Forth: As ever, you are right, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I make it clear from the start that I welcome the new clause. It gives me pleasure to say that I welcome it—

Mr. Bercow: Unalloyed pleasure.

Mr. Forth: Certainly. In his usual analytical but forceful way, my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale has illustrated all too well the weakness that regrettably still exists in clause 9. He has done us a great service in that respect, because doing so usefully puts in context the sense of urgency that he inexplicably introduced into the proceedings. It gives us the occasion to pause and reconsider whether we are wise to allow clause 9 to proceed in its present form.

The new clause therefore gives us the opportunity to find out from the Minister, if we can, not only the answers to the many questions my hon. Friend rightly posed but whether it would be helpful to include new clauses for the reasons that he gave and one or two others that I could modestly add. The more I read clause 9, the more delphic I find it. That would be worrying enough in any Bill, but it is more worrying in a Bill proposing radical changes to our electoral procedures. I hope to catch your eye on Third Reading, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I will want to expatiate on why the Bill is unnecessary and dangerous. However, I will leave that until later.

In the meantime, I want to concentrate on clause 9 and try to get from the Minister a clearer idea of what its provisions mean. The clause is tantalisingly long, but almost equally opaque. It does not reveal—as it should—either the intention or the effect of the proposals. The House has already spent considerable time on Second Reading and in Committee speculating on why we are to have this bifurcated register, and to what purposes it might be put. The fact that we are still speculating illustrates the difficulties in which the House may find itself.

Clause 9, which my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale is seeking to strengthen with the new clause, says that "provisions" should be made. That is a generous but vague word, which allows any amount of latitude to the Secretary of State of the day. The clause states that provisions will be made

"specifying a form of words".

That means that almost anything can be written into the provisions. It goes on to state that the provisions specifying the form of words will explain to those registered or applying to be registered

"the purposes for which the edited register might be used".

If that is not a circular argument, I do not know what is.

The form of words in the Bill is completely without meaning or substance. The Bill says that something will happen in the future which will give rise to an explanation of the purposes of something that we do not yet understand. That is what the House is being asked to accept in this important Bill, and it is not good enough.

The clause goes on, with impudence of the highest order, to say that the provisions will ascertain what is requested by or on behalf of such persons. We have the ultimate in legislative nonsense, with the Bill using a form of words which tells us nothing and leads us nowhere.

Mr. Bercow: I endorse my right hon. Friend's enthusiasm for the new clause. Is not it absolutely typical that the clause that the Government are defending has been drawn up by a Department which, according to my immediate calculation, contains four Ministers—the Home Secretary, two Ministers of State and an Under-Secretary—who are lawyers?

Mr. Forth: That frightening thought may go some way to explaining our difficulties. However, our job on Report is to get ourselves out of those difficulties, and recognising them is an important first step. My hon. Friend, who will have listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale's excellent introduction, may not have been reassured to be told that this nonsense is the outcome of a working party which produced a consensus and led to the urgency with which the Bill is being rushed through the House today.

5.45 pm

All of these words—"working parties", "consensus" and the spurious "urgency"—would make me suspicious about a Bill on any subject. However, this is where the new clause may come to our rescue. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale was persuasive, but it will take some considerable effort by the Minister to persuade me to support the Bill, although I do support the new clause. The doubts about the Bill, and its flaws, are evident.

The advantage of the new clause is that before we are led astray by the looseness of the drafting of the Bill—and before the peculiar provisions alluded to in clause 9 lead to a miasma of inexplicable verbiage—we will be rescued, in part, by the draft to be published and by the time that my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale, in his sagacity, has allowed for that process.

Mr. Greenway: Does my right hon. Friend agree that a draft of the regulations before us would be a considerable improvement on what we have now, which is nothing?

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is right. The irony is that the Government, who have told us so much about the virtues of pre-legislative activity and the strengthening of legislation by being open, have produced the antithesis of that—unless my hon. Friend believes that the working party, of which one of our colleagues was a member, did all the pre-legislative work.

Mr. Greenway: No.

Mr. Forth: That reassures me. We have a degree of reassurance with the safety net in the new clause, which may help us to correct a fundamental weakness in clause 9.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I have not taken a close interest in the progress of the Bill,

but it so happens that the last time I attended such a debate, the House was discussing this very clause. I have never understood how many people will have the right to have the register, unrestricted. If that number is more than three, any suggestion of limiting its use is pie in the sky.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is as perceptive as ever, and he may have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale asking a similar question. The fact that we still have to pose such a fundamental question illustrates the extent to which we have got ourselves into difficulties with the Bill. Notwithstanding the working party and the consensus—I am beginning to wonder how real that consensus was—the Minister has failed to answer that fundamental question. That leads me to the conclusion that unless we get a satisfactory answer, the House may not want the Bill to proceed and should find a way to send it back for further consideration.

I shall encapsulate my views by saying that I believe that the fundamental weaknesses and inadequacies of clause 9 can be partially corrected by new clause 1. On that basis, I am prepared to support the new clause, although I await the Minister's comments. I remain to be convinced of the necessity for, or viability and benefit of, the Bill.

Mr. Maclean: I was prompted to take an interest in clause 9 and new clause 1 because of the Minister's comments in the debate last week. I do not blame the Minister personally because he has to carry the departmental brief, and the Government as a whole are responsible for the extreme haste with which clause 9 was produced despite their not having thought through the consequences. The Minister answered concerns raised by Labour Members about direct marketing and credit checking. He said:

"We are discussing the detail of that with the industry. It is our intention that the full register shall not be completely available to the direct marketing industry. However, we are examining with the industry ways in which credit issues can be better resolved."

We are about to reach Third Reading of an important Bill that deals with the registration of electors, and the House should not be faced with such a clause as clause 9 which is, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said, completely inexplicable. It is so ambiguous that it could mean anything that any Minister wants it to mean, depending on what sort of regulations he wishes to produce or what sort of mood he is in.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): My right hon. Friend has mentioned an issue of grave concern to me. He will be aware that I have tabled several written questions exploring concerns about the use that might be made by the credit industry of the information made available under the proposals. My hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) and I are both officers of the all-party group on insurance and financial services, and I find it extraordinary, in these days of pre-legislative scrutiny, that the Government are putting proposals before the House when they have not yet finished their consultations on the safeguards for the public.

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend is right, and the humbug we get from the Government on that point is amazing. I sat on a Committee considering the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, which was also the subject of pre-legislative scrutiny, and the same Minister also served on the Committee. We heard from him a daily mantra of how wonderful the Government were for having conducted the pre-legislative scrutiny and that a range of complex issues had been discussed in advance. We are now considering a complex issue that will affect everyone on the electoral register, as well as all the direct marketing agencies, the banks and credit checking agencies and Members of Parliament, but the Government do not have a clue about the regulations they will draw up.

It gets worse. In the previous debate, the Minister was pressed on the subject of regulations and said:

"Once new regulations governing access to the full electoral register are in place, we can expect the public and any industries which are affected to make their views known about the impact of those regulations."

He later continued:

"I have no doubt that hon. Members will continue to raise points of concern and, where appropriate, changes will be made to accommodate them."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 461-62.]

That is a new doctrine from new Labour now it is in government. The attitude is, "We are not going to consult about the regulations in advance. We are going to pass them and if you don't like them, you can complain about them and we may change them later." If Ministers in the previous Government had tried that on, the Labour Opposition would have demanded emergency statements PDQ. It is an outrageous thing for a Minister to say. We know how difficult it is to change regulations after the event.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South) *rose—*

Mr. Maclean: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, who is a lawyer.

Mr. Bermingham: I declare that interest. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that many regulations have been sprung on the House at the last minute in the past 10 or 15 years, and it was only when objections were raised to them that changes were made? What has changed?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) answers that point, I think that we have dealt sufficiently with the timetable surrounding the Bill. I ask Members now to deal with the contents of new clause 1.

Mr. Maclean: Certainly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have covered the background to clause 9 and I shall now address the content—or what I believe should be the content—of the regulations.

I support new clause 1 because it attempts to make the diabolically vague clause 9 slightly better. New clause 1 would provide that

"The Secretary of State shall publish in draft any provisions he intends to make . . . and shall consult such persons and bodies as appear to him to have an interest in the operation of those provisions."

We heard from Labour Members in earlier debates about their concerns about the effect on direct marketing organisations. Denouncing junk mail is a popular pastime,

[Mr. Maclean]

but some junk mail we like and some we dislike. I have no particular objection to junk mail from a direct marketing organisation that may have obtained my name from the electoral register. If I do not like the wine on offer from Bordeaux Direct, I do not have to buy it and I can put the leaflet in the bin. If I do not want the thermal slippers from Kaleidoscope, I do not have to buy them. However, I am forced to deal with the junk mail I get from Members of Parliament and national lobby groups trying to blackmail me into supporting one cause or another in the House. I wish I could remove myself from that list.

I suspect that all the 35 million people on the electoral register have different views about the junk mail that they would not like to receive. However, I do not know how many organisations would consider it vital to have access to the full register but would be prohibited from doing so under the Bill. If those organisations were to be consulted before the regulations were drafted, the Government would have a chance to get them right. That is not a political point, because if any Government planned to make regulations that introduced two types of register—one with all the names on and one without some names—I know from my Home Office experience that a dozen organisations could stake a legitimate claim to one version of the list and another dozen would feel as strongly that the first lot should not get that version.

6 pm

In addition, what about the charities, some of which have been mentioned? I and other hon. Members received some very worrying correspondence from St. Dunstan's, the marvellous charity that helps people blinded, or partially blinded, as a result of military service. Every year that organisation, like other charities, sends out about 3 million letters and circulars to targeted people. Some would call that junk mail. I do not know where the mailing list comes from, or whether the charity buys it, or from whom. However, I think that the electoral register plays a key role as no charity would want to spend a fortune on the expensive lists available commercially.

I made a special trip to talk to the charity's organisers. Their sense that they were not getting proper support from the Government or the national lottery is not relevant to the debate, but they emphasised that their charity needed mailing lists for the millions of letters sent out. There are many other charities, of course.

Will the Minister say what position charities involved in direct mail operations will occupy in the future? What effect will the Bill have on other, commercial direct operations?

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): I am struck by what my right hon. Friend has said about charities. Is he not worried that the Bill will prevent charities from targeting their fund-raising activities on middle-class or prosperous households, with the result that they will get less than at present?

Mr. Maclean: I agree that that is a worry. Charities use the electoral register, *Yellow Pages*, postcode data and other data that they buy from other organisations. Target markets depend on what they want to sell or the funding that they want to raise: their target audience need not be middle class but could be any social group. The Bill could prohibit that activity. The new clause would at least give charities a chance to bring that difficulty to the Government's attention.

I have never won the *Reader's Digest* prize draw but I do not mind putting that magazine's circular in the bin, yet that advertising is precisely what the Government seem to want to stop. If that is their prejudice, so be it, but clause 9 and the Government's reluctance to consult about the regulations mean that other, legitimate operations—such as charities—would suffer.

Mr. Rowe: If hundreds of people are entitled to have access to the unrestricted register, is not it almost certain that some of them will engage in illegal practices? The demand for the register is great, and its availability vast. Will we not be creating a jungle of potential crime?

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend prompts me to bring forward the point with which I intended to conclude my contribution. In my little computer case in my office I have a compact disc entitled "Info UK". It contains more than 49 million names and addresses.

Mr. Forth: Gosh.

Mr. Maclean: Some telephone contact numbers are also included, although I do not use them. I acquired the CD—for about £49.50—because I was told that it existed. I did not believe that it could contain so many names and addresses, but it does. I could enter the name of almost any hon. Member, and acquire the relevant address.

Mr. Bermingham: Does the right hon. Gentleman have so much time to waste that he can check 49 million names?

Mr. Forth: He will read them out in a moment.

Mr. Maclean: I shall not go down that route, but there are various ways to waste time. Some would say that it is more interesting to read 49 million names and addresses than to read the speeches or court case reports of the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is true that there are many different ways of wasting time, and the right hon. Gentleman is verging on one.

Mr. Maclean: That is why I shall not be tempted out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The CD that I have described is already in wide circulation and is constantly updated. A different worry stems from the forthcoming CD containing aerial photographs of every house in the country. When the two discs are amalgamated, there could be serious security breaches involving senior police and military officers, politicians and others.

A large industry exists with access to the electoral register, but that comprises only a small part of a comprehensive database that can be easily searched and which is easily available. I suspect that most of the information on that database is bought from other companies. Every time we subscribe to an organisation or a Christmas catalogue, we have to tick a box to prevent our names being passed on to other companies.

Huge resources are devoted to the compilation of information. All the telephone directories and full lists of internet and e-mail addresses are available on computer. The Government can try to restrict access to the full register as much as they like, but the one copy that may be made available to a credit card checking company may well be sufficient to act as authentication for the almost total picture already compiled about the 56 million people in the country.

Hypothetically, we could abolish the electoral register completely. However, I suspect that it would remain possible to garner enough information from telephone directories, the internet and other sources to provide a pretty accurate register.

Mr. Forth: I just want to capture the moment and ask whether my right hon. Friend considers that the sources to which he has referred could, in an ironic sort of way, serve as an invaluable source of cross-checking and verification of the electoral register? Might not the downside of what he has suggested become an advantage? That matter is covered by a later amendment, but I wanted to ask the question as my right hon. Friend was on the topic.

Mr. Maclean: Yes, and one can use the House of Commons address checker facility to check whether a letter comes from a constituent. That facility can determine on which side of a constituency boundary an address may lie. Hon. Members can use the House of Commons system for that, and I am sure that outsiders can tap into it too. A later amendment would make it possible for electoral registration officers to check on commercial systems to verify whether the names supplied to them are legitimate and valid.

Because of the intervention of the hon. Member for St. Helens, South, the Minister may have thought my point about the huge amount of information that there is on compact disc a cause for humour. It is not—it is a cause for concern. It is therefore vital that the Government consult before they draw up the regulations.

I was alerted to Info UK by the police service. The police were legitimately concerned that, having taken vigorous steps to keep the names of certain officers off the electoral register for security purposes, their names were still on a CD that has sold about 1.5 million copies in the United Kingdom. The Government should consult the police service and other organisations with an interest in these matters, such as charities and direct marketing firms. I am absolutely certain that in a minefield such as this, with the best will in the world, no Government and no Minister can get it right in advance.

The Minister may live to regret saying last week that the Government will make the regulations governing access first, and that, once they were in place, they would wait for complaints on where they had got them wrong, and might then be minded to change them. That approach will cause enormous difficulty.

The new clause may be imperfectly drafted, but at least it will give the Government a chance to amend the regulations before they bring them before the House. I challenge the Minister: when, in his two years in the Home Office, has he prepared draft regulations that have not needed amending because someone spotted something wrong and suggested improvements? That is not a weakness, nor a fault. There is nothing wrong in preparing regulations with the help of the best lawyers that the Home Office can get its hands on, consulting on those regulations and then discovering a flaw or an omission. Pre-legislative scrutiny, consultation and trusting the people are supposed to be new Labour strengths, but the Minister is saying that he will not do that.

If the Government reject the new clause, it will be a sign that they believe they know best. They will keep the provisions to themselves and rush them through quickly, and to blazes with those outside who may suffer. I do not think that that is the Minister's attitude. I am sorry that he is locked into this box; it has no doubt been forced on him by his colleagues and by the agreement that he reached in an alleged committee in Cabinet. We can also blame the working party. I hope that he can wangle out of it tonight by accepting the new clause.

Mr. Bermingham: I hope to be but brief. I think that there is some sense in the new clause. I know that the Government may not agree with me, but sometimes it pays to stand back, to look and to think.

I hope that the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) did not think me facetious when I asked whether he had checked that there were 49 million names. I could not for a moment understand who the heck would want 49 million names on a compact disc. When I hear that 1.5 million have been sold, and that a CD will be issued showing an aerial photograph of everyone's house, I begin to wonder about the words "privacy" and "personal privacy", and it causes me some concern.

I came in here and, as I have done for years, glanced at the new clause. I listened to the comments and, when I heard the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) giving forth—no pun intended—I thought, "Here we go again. What's this load of rubbish?" Then I looked at the new clause again, and I thought very carefully. When in opposition, I said time and again about regulations, "If only people would stand back and think, we might cut down the number of challenges in the courts." That I have said not once but a thousand times in this House.

The regulations on the electoral register may not be perfect. It would be so nice to get them right, which is why I think that the new clause has some merit. It may need redrafting, but the thought behind it is not hostile. The new clause would effectively provide that, when the provisions have been drafted, they should be put out to consultation with a view to reaching agreement. It is better to agree something by consensus than to vote it through against opposition.

The second half of the new clause is also sensible. How many times do we get a raft of regulations and orders in July that most of us do not read? Then, some time in the fall, a constituent or someone connected with us says, "Did you see that regulation? What about X?"

6.15 pm

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman take it from me that his support for the new clause is warmly appreciated by Conservative Members, even though it has already earned the obvious wrath and probably the undying enmity of the representative of the Patronage Secretary—the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt). Will the hon. Member for St. Helens,

[Mr. Bercow]

South (Mr. Bermingham) say, on the strength of what he has already told us, whether he has a preferred length of consultation and a preferred format?

Mr. Bermingham: May I correct the hon. Gentleman? My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall)—my Whip—will not exercise his wrath on me. He, like me, is a civilised and dignified man; if we disagree, we will disagree head to head, as I would with my son. I have no fear in saying what I think, and I can now answer the hon. Gentleman's questions.

The Government should consult as widely as possible, and the period of that consultation should be realistic—a matter of months, not weeks or days. Indeed, if I may return to the point that I was making before the hon. Gentleman's intervention—I did not see the purpose of the intervention, but that does not matter—if the publication or the draft is published at the beginning of the summer, for example, there should be a realistic time for consultation. The period allowed for consultation should be parliamentary time, not calendar time. I have in the past railed and ranted against the previous Government for publishing in July draft proposals that had a closing date when Parliament was not sitting. That seems counter-productive. The object of the exercise when consulting is to consult.

If one is to be realistic, one consults in a way that enables those with whom one wishes to consult—or, if it is the public, to invite ideas—to have a realistic and practical opportunity to make their views known. Those views may or may not be of value—one does not know before one asks.

There may be considerable value in the new clause, just as there was in another Opposition amendment that I mentioned the other week—the one originally tabled in December. I am not sure about the wording or the drafting, but it has merit. It should be considered, and I hope that the Government will do so.

Mr. Wilshire: It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham). I hope that all hon. Members listened to the key reason that he gave for supporting new clause 1. I believe that it is of the utmost significance when a barrister tells the House that he supports a proposal because it will mean less work for the courts. A barrister advancing the argument of less work for his profession means that his motives are of the purest. It means that the House is being given advice that, whatever our political party, we would be foolish to reject.

Mr. Greenway: It is free advice.

Mr. Wilshire: The advice may be free—time will tell.

It is also a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). I listened with much interest to his various definitions of junk mail, but I was deeply disappointed to learn that he does not extend his definition to my pet hate in the letter box—the invoice and the bill. On reflection, he might agree that they were dispensable. Indeed, perhaps we could legislate against sending bills to Members of Parliament.

It is always enjoyable to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). This evening, he treated the House to a speech of great brevity and clarity, with the result that I was completely confused. The point of the new clause is to deal with confusion. My right hon. Friend's clarity made it clear that we cannot allow the Bill to proceed in its current form because it will confuse all those who try to tackle the matter.

I have no difficulty in supporting my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). I shall willingly vote for new clause 1, should he ask me to do so. As I said earlier, I have reservations about the haste with which the Bill has been introduced—that is one of the reasons for my intervention in the debate—but I wonder whether the new clause goes far enough.

However, my colleagues and I are grateful to the Government for accepting the amendment that was tabled in Committee. In opposition, one rapidly learns to be thankful for small mercies, so I am more than willing to thank the Government for that especially small mercy. The amendment makes a bad Bill slightly less bad—I would go no further than that. However, even that is something. We should not be grudging in our thanks to the Minister. Having heard those words of thanks, I hope that he will accept the points made by the hon. Member for St. Helens, South and will thank the hon. Gentleman for his support for the new clause.

I am concerned about some of the detail in the new clause. Under subsection (1), it states:

"The Secretary of State shall publish in draft".

I am worried about the words "shall publish". I am all in favour of the Secretary of State publishing draft provisions, but I should have preferred the new clause to specify that the Government should place them before Parliament. If the words are merely "shall publish", the Government will probably give a press briefing, which parliamentarians will not attend. If they do not do that, they will organise a press release and will slip the measure out late at night, when we shall not have an opportunity to discuss it as soon as it appears. Alternatively, to judge by past experience, they will leak it. They will claim that to be publication.

We need a new clause and a new Bill that provides for such provisions to be placed before Parliament. If we cannot have that, I am most willing to support my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale. If the Minister does not accept my comments and the Bill goes to another place, I hope that he will try to strengthen the new clause and accept it.

I should be grateful if the Minister would tell the House—

Mr. Gray: The Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), who is responsible for the Bill, is leaving the Chamber. He told me, from a sedentary position, that he did not have time to listen to the debate. Is that not worrying?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am the Minister responsible for the Bill, and I am in the Chamber.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order; it is just a statement of the position.

Mr. Wilshire: I am most grateful that the Minister is in the Chamber. I assume that, when the Under-Secretary left the Chamber, it was to take instructions from Mr. Campbell as to whether he should accept—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would return to new clause 1.

Mr. Wilshire: Of course, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

When the Minister replies to my point about the distinction between placing before Parliament and publishing, will he tell us which draft publications he has in mind? Surely, we cannot have reached this stage of the Bill's progress without the Government having at least the beginnings of some ideas. Will the Minister throw some light on the matter? When the time comes to vote on the measure, that will guide us as to whether we need it.

My second concern relates to the words—also under subsection (1)—

"shall consult such persons and bodies as appear to him".

I am not happy to leave it to a Minister to decide what "appears to him" to be correct, when we are dealing with the representation of the people. That is at the heart of our democracy. The new clause would be improved if the words were "as appears to Parliament". It is a parliamentary matter, and cannot safely be left to the Executive. Throughout the world, Executives have a nasty habit of playing fast and loose with democracy if they get half a chance. Parliament is the safeguard of our democracy. It should be for Parliament, not for Ministers, to decide whom it appears appropriate to consult at a given moment.

Mr. Bermingham: Would the hon. Gentleman agree that there has always been a list of the great and the good—the bodies to be consulted? That list rolls on from Government to Government. I cannot understand why he has such difficulty with the wording of that part of the new clause—it is the same format that has always been used.

Mr. Wilshire: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber when I intervened during the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border. I pointed out that, just because something has been done wrong for 100 years, there is no reason to continue to do it wrong. At least I am being consistent, because I am making the same points about the defence of the rights of Parliament that I made when we were in government. In dealing with matters that are at the heart of representative democracy, I have always believed that it should be for Parliament and not for the Executive to make the decisions. I suggest that the measure is one such matter.

I have some concerns about subsection (2) of the new clause, which includes the words

"until three months have elapsed".

Reference has already been made to that matter. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale will not mind my saying that I should have preferred the words to be "six months".

The hon. Member for St. Helens, South is correct: the three-month period makes it possible that the consultation process could take place when the House is not sitting. That cannot be right. It doubly reinforces my point about representative democracy. The provision is one that must come before the House, yet it could be dealt with during our absence.

There are several other considerations. During the summer, the people who are consulted might find it difficult to hold proper consultations. I assume that the Minister proposes to list a range of representative organisations who will be consulted. They will have to ask the advice of their members before responding. If an organisation with a large number of members—such as some of those in the direct marketing profession—has to consult those members during three months in the summer, it might not be able to undertake realistic and effective consultations, so as to give the Government the advice that is needed, during that period.

6.30 pm

It is also the case, as I have observed and I am sure that the House has observed during the past few weeks, that the United Kingdom comes perilously close to a standstill for an ever-longer period over the Christmas break. If the three-month consultation period were to include the run-up to Christmas, Christmas, the gap between Christmas and the new year, the new year and the hangover after the new year, an awful length of time within that three-month period could well be used up, and again we would not be getting the advice that we so urgently need.

Another aspect of the new clause that causes me slight concern is that although, admirably, it calls for much more clarity in the consultation process, it does not address what I consider to be a further issue of great importance—the need to secure parliamentary approval for the guidelines and regulations after consultation has taken place. I hope that, when the Minister replies to the debate, he will reassure us that he will take on board the concept of returning to Parliament and allowing us the final say on the suitability of the entire consultation process.

I hope that the Government listened to the hon. Member for St. Helens, South, even if they did not listen with any great care and attention to what Opposition Members said, because I am convinced that the new clause strengthens the Bill and meets the concerns of hon. Members on both sides of the House. I am amazed that it takes an Opposition amendment to address such a concern.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The new clause appears perfectly worthy, and worthy of Government support. I hope that the Government will be positive. I only add one PS. It comes to something when the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) mistakes the Labour Whip, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall), for the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt).

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The new clause was moved with characteristic vigour by the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), but I cannot invite the House to support it as it does not add sufficiently to the Bill to justify its inclusion.

As the House is aware, we are carefully considering what form any regulations governing access to the full electoral register should take. We are examining carefully the representations that have been made to us, and my officials are holding regular meetings with representatives of the credit and finance industries to discuss those matters. Only two days ago they had a very helpful meeting with them. We have also received advice from the Data Protection Registrar. Obviously, we need to strike a balance between meeting privacy and data protection concerns and ensuring that we do not unduly harm the industries that now make use of the electoral register. We believe that we can strike that balance, and that the regulations that we draft will achieve that. Any such regulations will be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure in both Houses, so I can tell the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) that Parliament will have a full opportunity to debate them. I can also repeat a previous commitment: that the regulations will be accompanied by a full regulatory impact assessment.

Mr. Bermingham: My hon. Friend begins to reassure me, but I do not understand why the regulations cannot be published in draft, to allow representatives not only of the regulatory industries and the financial industries but of other bodies to comment on the proposals. Then, when the regulations come before the House for debate, they will at least have been seen by many other people who have been able to have an input, or offer advice on what will become the regulations drafted by the Department.

Mr. O'Brien: If my hon. Friend had borne with me a little longer, he would have discovered that the regulations will be published in draft and consulted on.

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said on Second Reading, we believe that the full register should be available to credit and finance companies for the purpose of establishing identity in connection with credit applications, and the Data Protection Registrar has confirmed that she would be happy with that. Such a step will ensure that those who opt out do not inadvertently suffer by finding it hard to obtain credit. Our discussions with the banking and finance industries are now concentrating on precisely how we would make such an arrangement work.

As I hope to show, there is no question of ill-thought-out regulations being slipped through. The regulations that emerge will be based on the outcome of full and proper consultation with the industries concerned, and I am sure that they will be properly scrutinised here and in another place.

Mr. Maclean: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I am anxious to make progress. We have a great deal of work before us today. There are many amendments further down the selection list on which I am sure hon. Members would like to make progress, so I am not anxious to accept further interventions. However, I am happy to accept an intervention on this occasion from the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to the Minister; I hear his warnings. What he has just said is very welcome to all of us. We have obtained from him the huge concession that there will be proper consultation before the regulations are promulgated by his Department. Much as we welcome his conversion, what has changed since last Thursday when he made the opposite statement, as is recorded in *Hansard*?

Mr. O'Brien: I am not sure that anything has changed, nor that I made the opposite statement. We have always taken the view that, on this matter, we need properly to consult with the industry on regulations. I have maintained that view throughout, in letters to and meetings with various parts of the industry. We have never been in any doubt that the industry will be legitimately concerned with these matters and that we should ensure that we take on board their arguments.

The hon. Member for Ryedale asked whether we have a settled view on the direct marketing industry. We do have a settled view, but not a dogmatic view, about how we shall proceed. We are prepared to listen to representations from any organisation that may be prepared to make them and we shall happily consider them, but we shall need to be convinced by the strength of the argument. The Government have data protection and privacy obligations. The previous Government signed the data protection directive, with which we need to comply—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would want us to do so. It is our clear view that this legislation is necessary to comply with that.

The working party also consulted on all these issues. The hon. Gentleman said that he was not suggesting that we could not be taken on trust. Indeed, he said that he was satisfied that we were prepared to consult on these matters, and I am grateful to him for putting it in that way. He was worried that the consultation period may not have been very long because the full report of the working party came out in October, but I can tell him that the initial findings of the working party were known in July and that there was the opportunity to make representations, although I accept that it was over the summer period.

Some industries have been making representations and we have been continuing to listen to them. We do listen to the strength of the arguments. We have a settled view and a clear policy, but it is not dogmatic. The Direct Marketing Association and the Confederation of British Industry have sent us papers, and we shall continue to consider any representations that they are prepared to make.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) said that the credit card industry and the finance industry could seek information from other sources—even the telephone directory. He is right. In fact, most other European countries have quite stringent restrictions. Many of them prohibit the selling on of an electoral register. In those countries, the credit card and the direct marketing industries find the other means that are available to them. They might have to create new industries to gather that information, and that might

benefit the economy by creating new business opportunities. However, the credit card and the finance industries will have the opportunity to move forward.

I wish to deal with the issue of debt recovery that was raised by the hon. Member for Ryedale. We have consulted the Data Protection Registrar closely and the view taken was that the use of the register for debt recovery would be contrary to the spirit of the data protection directive. She took a different view to that about discovering the initial identity of individuals to decide whether credit could be granted to them. We could, no doubt, have a legalistic argument about the distinctions, but the registrar is there to advise and we have listened carefully to the advice that we have been given.

Mr. Greenway: Will the Minister consider whether the explanatory leaflet given to householders would touch on the effect of ticking the opt-out box on debt recovery and on the use of the register for direct marketing purposes, so that existing data can be verified to restrict the amount of junk mail? Is his mind open to those ideas so that, when people tick the box, they know that they are granting consent for the data to be used for those purposes? That would get round the problem of the directive.

Mr. O'Brien: As I understand it—the hon. Gentleman will correct me if I am wrong—he is asking whether, when a person considers whether to tick the opt-out box, he will know that the issues of debt recovery and direct marketing are before him. I see no reason why, on the face of it, such information should not appear in the leaflet that we shall circulate. Whether the debt recovery industry wants such information in the leaflet is a matter for consultation, but, in principle, I have an open mind. I am quite happy to consult the industry.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border asked whether we would consult the police. I am happy to inform him that we are doing that. My officials had a meeting with the National Criminal Intelligence Service only yesterday. Full and proper consultations will take place.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne asked how we will proceed. My officials are already consulting the industries and, once the Bill is enacted, we will produce a draft. That will be put on the internet, it will be circulated among those who have signalled their interest, and we will listen to their concerns. I do not want to place a three-month limit on the consultation because that would raise all sorts of issues, but we shall talk to the industry about the time that it needs for reasonable consultation.

I have given hon. Members as much reassurance as I can that we shall consult as much as is reasonable in all the circumstances. On that basis, I hope that the hon. Member for Ryedale will withdraw his motion.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful to hon. Members for contributing to the debate and for making pertinent points in support of my case that the House should receive greater reassurance about the implications of clause 9 and the forthcoming regulations. There should be consultation and proper time should be given to interested parties to reflect on the regulations. The House should then have the opportunity to debate and approve them.

I am grateful to the Minister for responding in the way that he did. His answer confirms that this has been an extremely worthwhile debate. I understand his point that he does not think that the new clause adds sufficiently to the Bill to justify its inclusion. That encourages me to try to do a little better next time to ensure that my new clauses are slightly more wide ranging.

6.45 pm

In effect, the Minister said that, although he has come to a settled view about direct marketing, it is not a dogmatic one. I interpret that to mean that his mind is not yet fully made up and that both his door and his mind are not closed to further representations. I intervened on the Minister because the more I study the Data Protection Registrar's concerns, the more I am convinced that the problems can be got round through the information that is given to people about the implications of ticking the opt-out box. As the Bill allows, the information should explain to them the effect that ticking the box would have on a number of issues.

All we can do in our debates is to provide the industry with the opportunity to discuss the issues further with the Minister. We have achieved that aim, but it is up to the industry to decide whether it is worth taking that opportunity. As I confirmed to the Minister the other day, the industry is perfectly prepared to pay the cost of the production of the leaflet, which would then be distributed at local authorities' expense when they make their electoral registration canvass.

I think that we have made significant progress in the last couple of hours—we have made considerably more than on Thursday. The Minister should expect the matters to be further scrutinised if and when the Bill goes to the other place. However, in the spirit of the Minister's positive response to our concerns, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1

NEW SYSTEM OF ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

Mr. Maclean: I beg to move amendment No. 13, in page 2, leave out lines 26 to 31.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 17, in clause 6, page 8, leave out lines 39 to 43.

Mr. Maclean: When my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) spoke with his customary wisdom in the previous debate, I reflected briefly that it was an unfortunate custom of the House that my right hon. Friend cannot properly be referred to as my right hon. and learned Friend. Not only does that form of address have a certain ring and cachet about it, it is absolutely appropriate and correct in view of the—to borrow his own phrase—sagacity of his previous contribution. My contribution will not be nearly as sagacious and it will be brief because I wish to reserve my energy for the Second Reading debates that will follow.

The amendments relate to different clauses of the Bill. Amendment No. 13 would amend clause 1 and amendment No. 17 would amend clause 6, but they would both do exactly the same thing. They would delete the three-month residency qualification for Northern Ireland.

[Mr. Maclean]

Amendment No. 13 would delete lines in clause 1 and amendment No. 17 would amend clause 6(5) and remove the words:

"Where a declaration of local connection is made for the purposes of registration in Northern Ireland, the declaration must state that the declarant has been in Northern Ireland during the whole of the period of three months ending on the date of the declaration."

Northern Ireland is still part of the United Kingdom, but we have no such requirement for a special three-month residency qualification in any other part of the United Kingdom. No doubt it could be said that before the so-called peace settlement the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland meant that to avoid fraud—it would not be personation in this case—a three-month residency qualification was necessary. I am not sure what the justification is for that. Presumably, the aim was to check the bona fides of the applicant for electoral registration to ensure that citizens of the Irish Republic, a foreign country, were not popping up to Northern Ireland on registration day, staying in the Province overnight, and getting on to the register.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is strange that the differential should exist and that it should be debated on the very day that the Government have claimed that normalisation will be achieved by the implementation of the Patten report on the RUC?

Mr. Maclean: That is a rather sad coincidence.

I shall give the House an example that demonstrates the absurdity of maintaining that provision in the Bill. No doubt the Minister will correct me if I am wrong. I have a friend who is an officer in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, on attachment in this country. He is a United Kingdom citizen, born and brought up in Northern Ireland, serving his country in the RUC. He has been working in this country for a few years and when he returns to Northern Ireland, if he has not maintained his place on the register, that British citizen, who pays taxes through the nose in this country, will have to live in the Province for at least three months before he can get on to the register in his own country and have a right to vote in British elections.

On the other hand, citizens from a foreign country—the Irish Republic—may pass through Great Britain and get on to the electoral register here. I am talking not about people who come here for a holiday or for the day, but people who are doing short-term work in this country. They may not be paying a penny of tax in the UK. They may not care a jot for this Parliament, this Government, this Opposition or any of our country's institutions. However, the fact that, due to an historical anomaly, we grant citizens of the Irish Republic the right to vote in British elections, those people will get on to the electoral register in Britain without having to spend three months here to gain a residency qualification

I think that I have got the facts correct: citizens of the Irish Republic passing through Great Britain get on to the register overnight, but UK citizens serving in Her Majesty's forces who return to their homes in Northern Ireland cannot get on to the register unless they have lived in the Province for three months and produced all the necessary documentation to prove that they are not frauds or foreigners.

I do not find that an absurdity; I find it an obscenity. It is outrageous that we have built-in conditions that disadvantage our citizens, particularly those who are most likely to be affected: members of Her Majesty's armed forces who come from Northern Ireland to serve in regiments outside Northern Ireland and who return to their own country to retire or on posting, and who for technical reasons may not have the right to vote. Of course, that disadvantage may affect hundreds of other civilians who are also doing worthwhile work.

If there was justification in the past, and there may have been, for the three-month Northern Ireland residency qualification, there is certainly no justification for allowing foreigners, such as citizens of the Irish Republic, to vote in British elections. However, that is another anomaly, which I shall leave undisturbed tonight. If there was justification in the past, what is the justification now when we are told that the peace process has resulted in fundamental change?

We are now to destroy the RUC itself. We are to allow two members of Sinn Fein-IRA—whom my hon. Friends in the Ulster Unionist party call "unreconstructed terrorists"—to participate in the Government of Northern Ireland. Perhaps they are to have an office next to mine and £50,000 of allowances in a couple of weeks. Perhaps they are to have access to the whole of Parliament, to be called a party and to be given short money because they are now democratic. Perhaps they will be wandering in and out of the Cafeteria. If all that is to happen, it is surely a sign that we are in a radically different world from the one in which a three-month residency qualification was appropriate.

Mr. William Ross: The right hon. Gentleman has referred to the forthcoming Disqualifications Bill in his important speech. Will he inquire whether the Minister will make available to us the Government's security knowledge of the two individuals whom we shall allow into the House next week? That would make very interesting reading.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We would be pushing it if we moved on to that particular subject.

Mr. Maclean: Even I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, recognise that that is not a subject that you want me to pursue tonight, although the hon. Gentleman's point is valid and needs to be explored in a future debate.

I described the situation as an obscenity. It will be even worse next Tuesday when another Bill is rushed through this House, because it will not be just any citizens of the Irish Republic who are entitled to be on our electoral register and to vote. The Government intend to extend to Members of Parliament in southern Ireland the privilege of becoming serving Members in any of our parliamentary institutions—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is straying from the point. He knows full well that we are discussing a narrow amendment, and he is going wide of the subject.

Mr. Maclean: I entirely accept your point, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The amendment would delete the three-month residency qualification. I was merely trying to illustrate

the point that people from Northern Ireland who work in the rest of the UK and return to Northern Ireland will have to prove that they have lived in the Province for three months before they can vote. The Minister will probably say that he does not want to remove that condition and that, for various reasons, it must remain. He would say to the people of Northern Ireland, "Tough luck, ladies and gentleman. You have got to have a three-month residency qualification."

I was not trying to explore the Bill that we shall debate on Monday and Tuesday; I was simply trying to illustrate how wrong the situation is for British citizens in Northern Ireland, because if the Disqualifications Bill goes through the House next week, Senators—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I say once again to the right hon. Gentleman that he has already said that. He has made that case to the House and he must move on without repeating what he has already said.

Mr. Maclean: I have no intention of repeating my point, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was not clear that the point had been made. I am not as capable of making lucid points as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. I sometimes think that I have to put my point again in a slightly different way to make sure that it has been understood. I accept your advice that it has been understood.

I move on to the substance of my remarks. The three-month residency qualification is in clauses 4 and 6. Without touching on the previous debate—if I were to mention that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you would rule me out of order—I can say that it was about the Government making regulations. Clause 9 is vague and gives the Government great scope to produce any regulations that they want, yet in clauses 4 and 6 there is no suggestion that the residency qualification should be dealt with by regulation.

7 pm

What will happen in a couple of months' time when the Bill has been rushed through the House, rushed through another place, and becomes law? What happens when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland comes to the Cabinet sub-Committee and says, "More progress has been made in Northern Ireland, so we must now scrap the residency qualification"? Given the pace at which the Government have been changing the constitution of this country and the law in Northern Ireland, it is no exaggeration to say that it is likely that, at some point in the future and for various reasons about which I shall not speculate, the Government will conclude that the three-month residency qualification is an obstacle to further progress in the peace process, or offends one or another of the political parties in Northern Ireland. However, if the amendment is not made, the provision will be in primary legislation; therefore, to change it, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will have to introduce another piece of legislation.

I am giving the Government an opportunity. If passed, the amendments would delete the relevant lines from clauses 4 and 6. However, if the Government believe that a residency qualification is essential for now, they can build in a regulation-making power that would enable them to make such a provision. They might be sensible to take the chance offered in another place to change clauses 4 and 6 and take a power that enables them to make a regulation requiring, for the time being, a residency qualification in Northern Ireland. Then, in two or six months' time, when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland says that, in the interests of peace, the residency qualification must be dropped, the Government will be able to make the necessary changes immediately, without consultation.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend knows that I have the highest regard for the way in which he raises all sorts of important issues in the House. However, does he accept that many people criticise the Government's legislation for leaving too much to secondary legislation, as was the case with the Health Act 1999? Would not the acceptance of his proposals leave far too open matters that deserve, and should receive, the House's full attention, rather than being left to a decision made Upstairs?

Mr. Maclean: I accept my hon. Friend's point that important pieces of election law should not be subject to the whim of regulation. However, we have just spent an hour or so debating a vital clause, the provisions of which are to be left entirely to regulations that we have not yet seen, which are likely to be subject to a brief consultation process before being bounced through. If the Government consider it acceptable to make a host of regulations under clause 9 and other clauses, why do they not use regulation in the narrow matter of the Northern Ireland residency provision?

The Government can easily put in the Bill a provision stating that there will be a residency qualification in Northern Ireland, renewable by regulation each year until such time as the Secretary of State concludes that it is no longer needed—it would be similar to the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts. There are other means by which the Government can attain their end, so why put it in the Bill? I am giving the Government an opt-out, but what I really want to hear is not that they will make that provision through regulation, but that it is not necessary at all, because it is wrong to discriminate against British citizens who live in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Forth: I rise to reinforce the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and to thank him for his generous words. He might come to regret them, but I shall try to live up to his praise.

I start by reinforcing my right hon. Friend's final argument, which is well worn but none the less important. During consideration of almost every Bill with which I have been involved during my many years as a Member of Parliament, we have, quite properly, debated the wisdom or otherwise of putting a provision in a Bill, thus giving it a sort of sanctity—fixing it. It is often argued that, if a matter is sufficiently important, there is a case for putting it in the Bill in order deliberately to make it more difficult to remove or alter. We have all heard that argument, both in Standing Committee and on the Floor of the House. My right hon. Friend's question is whether that argument makes sense in the context of this Bill.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) pointed out, it seems strange that, just a few hours after hearing an important statement from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about the future

[Mr. Forth]

of the RUC in the context of progress being made—the Secretary of State was at pains to emphasise that the environment in Northern Ireland was changing and that we must all be prepared to make changes—we are considering a Bill that features a measure that would, by definition, be fixed or at least extremely difficult to change. I cannot understand how those two things can be squared.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend makes a sound point. Does he agree that, as in many other circumstances, the soundbite "joined-up government" makes no sense in this instance?

Mr. Forth: That is true. I wonder whether the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department consulted about the provision that we are debating. The Minister will agree that it appears greatly at odds with the message that his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland wants to send—which is about the normalisation of Northern Ireland as conditions there come more into line with conditions in the United Kingdom mainland—to have in the Bill a provision that marks out Northern Ireland as being distinct and different from the rest of the United Kingdom. The Opposition are challenging that contradiction and the wisdom of the Government approach. The Government cannot have it both ways: if government were joined-up, there would be consistency between the arguments that they present and the content of their Bills.

The problem goes deeper than that. Anyone who has spent any time as a Member of Parliament knows that, as soon as something is put in a Bill, it becomes fixed to some degree—not immutable, but extremely difficult to alter, because a provision in primary legislation can be changed only by further primary legislation. Do the Government really want to fix a measure relating to Northern Ireland to that extent, given their desire to persuade us that matters in Northern Ireland are moving forward, progressing, changing and improving—that Northern Ireland is becoming more "normal", as they would describe it?

We have with us a distinguished colleague from Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross). I hope that he will try to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, during this debate, because his contribution will be invaluable in revealing the point of view of our friends in Northern Ireland. We can only re-emphasise our commitment to the integrity of the United Kingdom, our regard for Northern Ireland and our desire that it should be perceived as part of the United Kingdom. Therefore, the provision relating to a residency qualification is offensive, because it deliberately and gratuitously marks out Northern Ireland as requiring special treatment.

I believe that I can anticipate the Minister's argument. He will say that there is a long-standing fear that aliens from the Republic of Ireland might try to invade the body politic in Northern Ireland by inveigling their way on to the electoral register, thus gaining influence over the voting process in that part of the United Kingdom. Be that as it may—I make no judgment as to the likelihood of that happening or even as to whether it has already happened—I can only speculate about whether a three-month residency requirement would do anything to prevent that process. I doubt very much that a three-month residency qualification would deter an alien person from the Republic of Ireland who was sufficiently determined to infiltrate the political process in Northern Ireland.

Setting that aside for a moment, I hope that the Minister recognises that the provisions of the Bill, as it would be if the amendments were accepted, backed up by provisions dealing with validation and verification of the registration process that will—provided they are accepted—be inserted in the Bill by amendments to which we shall come shortly, will provide sufficient safeguards against the process of alien infiltration of which the Minister appears so afraid and which he might argue is the motivation for his putting such an ill-conceived measure in the Bill.

We therefore have a peculiar set of circumstances. I shall be interested to hear the Minister weave his way through this part of the argument. I hope that he will deal with the discussions that he may have had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in this context and with whether the right hon. Gentleman is content with this part of the Bill. I would like to know whether the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland feels that he can square what he said in the House a few hours ago with what is in the Bill relating to Northern Ireland. I want the Minister to tell me whether he regards Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom, to be treated in every way the same as the rest of the United Kingdom, and whether he believes that the provisions that we shall come to later in our deliberations might well be sufficient to provide proper safeguards in the registration process without the need for an overriding process of the sort that we now have.

Mr. Bercow: Is it conceivable that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is content with the provision and that, notwithstanding what my right hon. Friend has said and notwithstanding the Secretary of State's statement this afternoon, he advocated its inclusion in the Bill?

Mr. Forth: We know none of those things. It is ironic that so often we find ourselves speculating, whereas, in an era of alleged open government, we should know for sure. Ministers should be elbowing one another aside in their eagerness to share their thoughts with us and to demonstrate the Government's integrity and the effectiveness of collective responsibility. That should be the position, but I have not seen much sign of it so far.

Mr. Fabricant: I speak directly to the clause. Does my right hon. Friend think that it is a direct consequence of the fact that Cabinet meetings are no longer held in the manner in which they were previously—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is speaking not to a clause but to an amendment. He is out of order.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because you know how anxious I am to get through this business quickly and to move on to Third Reading, when I can make really expansive remarks. My remarks now are but a taste of what I want to say. I cannot wait for Third

Reading. I shall deal narrowly with my hon. Friend's point while I am on my feet, but first I shall respond to the introduction of my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border. He pointed out that we are dealing not only with the matters set out in clause 1 but with the parallel provisions to which our amendments apply in clauses 6 to 8, on page 8. We shall return to the matter when we deal with other amendments, because the Bill is closely intertwined and interwoven with declarations of local connection in the context of Northern Ireland.

I have a few doubts about such declarations as a principle, a concept and a working practice. Some of the amendments with which we shall deal later are designed to make the matter much more secure. Suffice to say that it is being suggested that, somehow, the declaration of local connection process or procedure in the Bill should be different in Northern Ireland. I do not see why that should be so. We are talking not about aliens coming from a strange foreign country, such as the Republic of Ireland, but local connection and the way in which that can be properly established.

I hope that the Minister will clarify the matter. He has his work cut out tonight. He will have to work really hard to persuade us on this part of the Bill. However, I am sure that he can because he is an able man and has shown himself willing so far to do so. In this instance, he will have to take us carefully through the argument about why, in the context of local connection—we are seeking to amend the process by means of the amendment—Northern Ireland is necessarily different.

7.15 pm

I have speculated on what the Minister might say about the previous part of the argument, but I cannot even begin to imagine how he will justify singling out Northern Ireland when it comes to declarations of local connection. I have my suspicions about the entire process, and no doubt we shall examine it later in our proceedings. However, at this stage I wish to point out that, yet again, distinctions are made between circumstances in Northern Ireland and those elsewhere when the Government are at pains to try to persuade the House that distinctions exist less and less, if they have not disappeared entirely.

In conclusion—

Mr. Maclean: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: I will give way, but I wanted to conclude my remarks.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend is dealing with local connection and I wished to intervene before he departed from it. I draw attention to lines 39 to 44 in clause 6 on page 8. Does he not find it incongruous that, about 15 lines beforehand, the clause states that a person can be on the register, having made a declaration of local connection, if he is a citizen of the Irish Republic? Will he contrast that with the fact that a citizen of Northern Ireland who lives there cannot get on the register for three months?

Mr. Forth: As ever, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. The more we examine the Bill, the more we are forced to believe that it is ill-directed, poorly drafted and contains the seeds of some real dangers for our electoral processes. That is bad enough for the mainland; how much worse could it be in relation to Northern Ireland, with the difficulties that it has? The hon. Member for East Londonderry mentioned earlier in an intervention that he is all too well aware of the dangers.

I hope that I have said enough to persuade the House that having these provisions in the Bill is utter folly. The position would be bad enough anyway, but having in the Bill such provisions referring to Northern Ireland will not do. I hope that the Minister will accept that. Either he will deploy the most powerful and detailed arguments to persuade us that what I have said is groundless, or he must accept the amendments to put right this part of the Bill.

Mr. William Ross: Given that the right hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and I agree on so many points that come before the House, they will understand how deep is my pain that I must disagree with them on this occasion. I understand from the expression of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that he is quite horrified. I hope that he will understand that my pain is exactly the same as that felt by every member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary this evening, and that of every widow of an RUC officer who was murdered by the IRA. I hope that he will understand how angry those people are.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman knows better. He knows that he must speak to the amendment.

Mr. Ross: That is the point. I was explaining how deeply pained I am that I must disagree with right hon. and hon. Members on this occasion. They will be aware that, if the amendment were accepted, it would run across existing legislation in Northern Ireland. The legislation provides that there must be residence of three months before 15 September, which is the qualifying date for electoral registration in Northern Ireland. It was provided as a safeguard. It meant that an individual had to come to live in Northern Ireland for three months. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has dealt with the danger that people would move from the Irish Republic into sensitive areas where 100 or 50 votes could make an enormous difference. Individuals had to be resident for three months before 15 September. They then had literally to stay there for another three months until the electoral list became the electoral register, which would be towards Christmas. In other words, all the hearings in the local electoral courts had to be completed and all the rest of it. Instead of having to stay for three months, they had to stay for six. That is why the legislation exists in regard to Northern Ireland. As the right hon. Gentlemen know, in normal circumstances I am most willing that legislation should be exactly the same for the whole of the United Kingdom.

May I suggest to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that rather than removing the provision for Northern Ireland, it should apply to the entire United Kingdom? That would be a much better solution to the problem. I can tell my right hon. Friends that there are always an enormous number of people floating backwards and forwards between the Irish Republic and Great Britain, who have voting rights in this country.

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Gentleman will see that amendment No. 30, which we shall discuss later, would

[Mr. Greenway]

have precisely that effect in respect of declarations of local connection. Its purpose is to avoid abuse at by-elections.

Mr. Ross: I am gratified that Conservative Members have spotted the loophole—the danger for the electoral process in Great Britain—and are trying to take steps to close it. The Government cannot have it both ways. They cannot say one thing for Northern Ireland and reject the amendment, and then reject the next amendment, which protects the position in regard to Great Britain.

I am delighted that right hon. and hon. Members with much greater expertise and resources than I have spotted the loophole, or rather, the barn door, and have proposed precautions to close the door. I hope that they are successful.

I wonder whether the right hon. Gentlemen considered the crazy paragraph just after the words that amendment No. 17 would remove, which states:

"No declaration of local connection shall be specially made by a person for the purposes of local government elections".

When I raised the matter in Committee, the Minister said that he would consider the point and write to me. He has not done so yet, so perhaps he has not had enough time to consider it.

The proposals hang together as a piece. We need to know the purpose of the provision. If it deals with individuals coming into Northern Ireland and the requirement for them to be there for three months, how can it specify that those people cannot come in and register for the sole purpose of taking part in a local government election? The date of local government elections is known years ahead. I do not understand what the words mean. The Minister is listening, and I know that by this time he will have considered the matter, so he will be able to give us a clear answer.

Mr. Maclean: I have been listening carefully and with great respect to my hon. Friend's point. Is it his firm view that there is still a genuine threat in Northern Ireland of the electoral register being flooded with aliens from another country and distortions occurring in the electoral process, which make the three-month provision vital?

Mr. Ross: That is indeed my view. I believe that there are certain circumstances and certain areas—perhaps very small—where that could be a factor. Whenever the outcome of council elections especially, and perhaps constituency elections, hangs on a handful of votes, 20 or 30 people moving into each ward or 50 people in a critical ward could make an enormous difference.

I fear that that is true not only in Northern Ireland, but in Wales, perhaps in Scotland and in certain parts of England. If the Government want to retain the words in the Bill, they cannot refuse to insert the words that Conservative Members will seek to insert in later amendments.

It pains me to tell the right hon. Gentlemen that I cannot support their amendment, but my pain has been considerably diminished by the discovery that they have spotted the barn door that exists with regard to Great Britain and that they propose a way of dealing with it. I hope that the Government will not wait for the amendment to be moved, but that the Minister will rise to say that it is so wise, so reasonable and so much in keeping with the provisions of clause 6 that the Government will instantly accept the amendment, and that they will make certain that the same rules apply throughout the United Kingdom.

I should not like the Minister to lose his seat, in case a large number of Unionists moved over and settled in his constituency. After the performance of his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland today, he would not have a snowball's chance of getting an ex-Unionist vote. In the past, many people voted for the Labour party in Northern Ireland. By their actions today, the Government have destroyed any possibility of those people, should they emigrate to Great Britain, ever casting a vote for that party.

The destruction being wreaked on the police force in Northern Ireland—I dare not stray, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for you would instantly call me to order. Destroying the RUC and leaving so many people open to future attack by terrorists bites deeply and is greatly resented. That resentment will not quickly fade. The Minister will be long gone from the House before it will fade or be forgotten.

Mr. Wilshire: It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross)—my hon. Friend, if he will allow me to call him that, because that is indeed what he is. It may help him to know that not only have events earlier in the day caused great hurt and offence to the widows of RUC officers—a matter which, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you rightly say we should not discuss—but that the parts of the Bill with which amendments Nos. 13 and 17 deal will also cause hurt and offence to the widows of RUC officers and others who have served so bravely in that part of the United Kingdom.

I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry that I have always wondered what the Irish air, the Ulster-East Londonderry mist, does to the mind. I was deeply touched to hear ascribed to the Minister a great sense of charity and reasonableness, which I hope will lead the hon. Gentleman later to agree, if not with the Opposition, then with my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry.

If that is what the mists of East Londonderry do, perhaps we should all move there, if necessary for the three months, and have ourselves registered to vote in my hon. Friend's constituency. If by any chance today's events have not guaranteed his re-election for life, I for one would be delighted to go there and support him, should he ever need my vote.

I am an Englishman and proud of it, but I have always done my level best to try to see things through the eyes of those who live in Northern Ireland. Therefore I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about the special provisions. He will see from the list of amendments tabled by my right hon. Friends that amendment No. 3 would have provided an alternative way of dealing with the problem that he rightly identifies. Sadly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you did not select it.

Had we gone down the route proposed in amendment No. 3, the present debate would not have been necessary. Amendment No. 3 would have removed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Amendment No. 3 has not been selected, so the hon. Gentleman cannot discuss it. He can discuss only the two amendments before us.

Mr. Wilshire: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I understand that. I am sure that it will be possible to raise the same issue as a matter that arises from amendment No. 13.

The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry—that the rule should apply to the entire United Kingdom—appeals to me. I might have enthusiastically supported such an amendment, had he tabled it.

7.30 pm

Every week, nearly 500,000 people land at Heathrow airport on the borders of my constituency. The thought of their being able to rush into Spelthorne council offices and register to vote before they move on appals me.

Mr. William Ross: Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman and also apologise for not spotting the issue that he raised. If I had spotted the problem, I would have tabled an amendment on it. However, the hon. Gentleman knows that the Bill builds brick after brick on previous legislation. We have reached a point where we need consolidation. Before tabling an amendment, we need a week to plough through all the legislation.

Mr. Wilshire: That is the problem with trying to rush a Bill through unnecessarily. Calmer, more reflective consideration would undoubtedly have made a bad Bill slightly less bad.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend speaks of rushing the measure through. The Government's interest is reflected by the presence of only two Labour Members while the Opposition Benches are packed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members must concentrate on the amendments.

Mr. Wilshire: My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) makes the fair point that many Opposition Members are deeply worried about the clause. It is significant that many of my hon. Friends are here to debate amendments Nos. 13 and 17 while Labour Members do not seem interested in them. Even if we cannot discuss the number of hon. Members in the Chamber, we can consider those who are interested and those who show no interest in the amendments. But you rightly urge me to speak about the substance of the amendments, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Amendment No. 13 would delete subsection (2). It is important to understand the exact aim of the amendment. Paragraphs (a), (b), (c) and (d) of clause 4(1) set out ways in which people can register. Amendment No. 13 is necessary because of subsection (1)(c), which provides that citizens of the Republic of Ireland can, of right, get on to a United Kingdom register. But for that provision, amendment No. 13 would be unnecessary. I believe that it would have been better to face the problem of our giving foreigners a vote in the United Kingdom. If we did not do that, the amendment would have been unnecessary. I have never understood the reason for giving foreigners votes on the internal affairs of the United Kingdom.

People claim that we have reciprocal arrangements, but, with the greatest respect, I do not want to vote in the Irish Republic. If I wanted to vote in that alien, foreign country, I would become an Irish citizen. I do not want to do that, so I do not understand why right my hon. Friends should have had to table amendment No. 13. We should not have to tackle such a problem. The fact remains that the problem exists, and I therefore support my right hon. Friends' approach.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): In earlier discussions, many hon. Members, especially Labour Members, commented on the ability of United Kingdom citizens to vote in this country when they were not resident for a period of time. There is inconsistency in their attitude towards the ability of our citizens and those of the Irish Republic to vote in UK elections.

Mr. Wilshire: It has become obvious in the past year or two that there are no depths to which the Government will not sink in trying to appease the Republic of Ireland. The provision is yet another example of the appeasement that takes place when the Government are faced with people pointing guns at them. If they believe that such appeasement will work, I have news for them: it will not.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that we are talking not only about the Government's insatiable appetite for appeasement but about their determination at all costs and wherever possible to gerrymander?

Mr. Wilshire: The Government are keen on anything that gives the Labour party an advantage in electioneering.

I assume that the Minister judged subsection (2) necessary through fear of thousands of foreigners jumping into coaches for an away-day or a weekend break and charging across the border into the United Kingdom for just long enough to try to gerrymander. However, my understanding of Northern Ireland politics, of which I try to be a student, shows that it does not take people on away-days from the Republic to cause a problem; people who are legitimately entitled to be on the register vote sufficiently often to do their own gerrymandering without involving those from a foreign country to add to the confusion. The Government would be advised to tackle the "vote early, vote often" problem rather than concentrating on people being bussed in from Dublin.

Mr. Maclean: The question for the Minister is one that I wish I had asked my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), but it has just occurred to me. If the provision is vital to prevent citizens of a foreign country from swamping Northern Ireland on 10 October, or whatever the date for registration, and they thus cannot be trusted, why should they be entitled to a vote in the United Kingdom or for the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Mr. Wilshire: My right hon. Friend had no choice but to ask me the question because I gave way to him, but I am the last person to give him a sensible answer. I do not have an answer, and I suspect that the Government do not either. I shall leave it to the Minister to try to defend the indefensible.

[Mr. Wilshire]

I am worried about the way in which the Bill disfranchises many British citizens. That cannot be right. It is wrong for the House to pass measures that take the vote away from British citizens. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border gave one example, but there are others that we need to consider. Not only people who serve the Crown in our armed forces and leave Northern Ireland, but any British subject normally resident in Northern Ireland who for some reason has to spend time in Great Britain in the prescribed three-month period, will be caught by the problem. Such people will automatically be left off the register. People who return to Great Britain from Northern Ireland, perhaps to nurse or take care of members of their families who are ill, during the specified three-month period will no longer qualify for a vote in their own country. People who are normally resident in Northern Ireland and have jobs that take them to Great Britain for periods of time would also be struck off the register. That cannot be right.

We should consider another group of people: those who have been residents in Great Britain, perhaps for decades, who choose to move to that other part of the United Kingdom—Northern Ireland. Perhaps a promotion in their jobs means that they move to Belfast, or perhaps they move to be with their families. Perhaps, for the air or mists of Londonderry, people choose to retire in that beautiful part of our country. If such people do so within three months of the compilation of a register, they will lose their vote for the following year. That cannot be right.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government are following in the tradition of the previous Government and encouraging investment in Northern Ireland. That is to be applauded. Does my hon. Friend think that there may be individuals in the rest of the United Kingdom—England, Scotland and Wales—who may be deterred from taking one of the new jobs that have been created in Northern Ireland because they would lose their voting rights as a consequence of the measure?

Mr. Wilshire: My hon. Friend raises an important point, which I must confess I had not got round to. I am most grateful to him for drawing it to my attention and I hope that the whole House will see that as yet another reason why the Bill should not pass tonight without amendment. I find the matter at the heart of amendment No. 13 as deeply offensive as does my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border. If we do not amend the Bill, it will create two classes of British elector: the first-class electors, who will mainly be in Great Britain, and the second-class electors, who will mainly be in Northern Ireland. I cannot believe that that is what the Government intend. Up to now, there have been no lengths to which they would not go, but are they seriously telling us that they are content with a Bill that will create two classes of British elector? If so, they should be deeply ashamed.

Amendment No. 17, on the face of it, appears to do exactly the same thing, but it has its arguments the other way round. As I understand it, the provision with which it seeks to deal addresses those people who, for whatever reason, are at the moment in a mental hospital or institution. They will be given the right to identify a place where they have a local connection. Throughout Great Britain, such people will only have to indicate an address for the provisions to apply. But if someone identifies an address in Northern Ireland, an additional test will be applied—the connection will have had to exist for a longer period.

On this occasion, the test of a longer period could sensibly be applied to Great Britain as well as Northern Ireland because we are dealing with a specialist, sensitive and difficult issue. To have a period of time attached to the address would be in everybody's interest, because it would help to ensure that a sensible, lasting judgment was made. I support the amendment for that reason, but the Minister could get himself out of difficulty by saying that he will reintroduce it in another place, applying it not only to Northern Ireland but to Great Britain as well.

I believe that it is deeply offensive to the British citizens who live in Northern Ireland to be told that, yet again, they are to be treated separately and in a second-class way. I will be charitable to the Minister and accept that he genuinely does not intend to cause that hurt and offence to the widows of those Royal Ulster Constabulary officers who have been killed over the years in the tragedy that has been Northern Ireland. In that spirit, I plead with him either to accept the amendments or to listen to the points that were made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry and solve the problem in the alternative way.

Mr. Fabricant: I had not intended to speak in the debate, although I would support the amendment if it were pressed to a Division, but my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) made some powerful arguments. He mentioned the Royal Ulster Constabulary officers who have died, and we should remember that 301 serving officers have died in the cause of freedom, liberty and equity over the past few years in the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot allow the hon. Gentleman to talk about the RUC. Important as it is, it does not fall within the confines of the amendment, to which he must speak.

Mr. Fabricant: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

7.45 pm

Mr. Maclean: I am afraid that my point might not be in order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I should point out that those officers did not die—they were murdered.

Mr. Fabricant: My right hon. Friend might be out of order, but nevertheless I hope that *Hansard* will note his comment, with which I wholly agree.

I support the amendment because, as my right hon. and hon. Friends have so ably pointed out, there is an inconsistency. In November, I suffered a personal tragedy: after 10 years, I had to surrender my dark blue passport and obtain my little flexible red European Union passport, which still has on its face—this is relevant, Mr. Deputy Speaker—the words, "The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland", an integrated whole.

The Government are following in the tradition of the previous Government in trying to normalise the situation in Northern Ireland. As I pointed out in an intervention, it is therefore ironic that, today of all days, we should be debating a measure that creates an inconsistency—

a difference—between one part of the United Kingdom and another. I truly believe that that is wrong on two counts: first, on principle and, secondly, because it sends out all the wrong signals. Today we have heard a statement about the future of the RUC and the hopes of the Government—and, indeed, of the whole House—for the future of Northern Ireland and its normalisation, but only a few hours later we are, I suspect, about to hear the Minister argue against this reasonable amendment, which says that we should take an holistic approach to the Representation of the People Bill in particular and the law in general in respect of England, Scotland and Wales and the United Kingdom.

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend may agree that an aspect of the statement on the Patten report is germane to the amendment. Several thousand RUC officers will be removed from service and given a substantial payment. They will probably become a mobile element of the population of Northern Ireland. They may move to other constituencies in Northern Ireland or come to other parts of the United Kingdom for a time. In that context, they are very much affected by the amendment.

Mr. Fabricant: That point had not occurred to me, but is germane. If such officers attempt to seek work in other parts of the Province, they will meet the residency requirement for Northern Ireland, but the Minister must explain whether under the Bill they would have to be resident in a new constituency for three months to have a vote there. I hope that he will make that clear, one way or another.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) has highlighted an extremely pertinent point. In reflecting on it, will my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield concede that the greater likelihood is that the problem will be not that an individual will perambulate around Northern Ireland or move to another part of it while looking for new employment but that he will move to another part of the kingdom altogether? If he is absent for several months, he may have great difficulties. Does not that point need to be entertained by Ministers?

Mr. Fabricant: As ever, my hon. Friend raises a fascinating and powerful point, which demonstrates the inconsistency of the provision. That ex-RUC police officer would have to demonstrate not that he had been in England, Scotland or Wales for three months—merely that he was resident on 10 October or whatever the night might be. I might add that such an officer would have great difficulty in finding employment in a police constabulary in England, Scotland or Wales, given that in Staffordshire, for example, there has been a reduction in the number of police officers. I suspect that the poor ex-RUC officer would end up getting a job as a security guard or something else.

I understand why the clause was drafted in the first place. I suspect that it was to prevent people from the Republic of Ireland from moving to Northern Ireland in order to vote. Perhaps the Minister will say whether that is so. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has pointed out, that provision would be no deterrent. Many people living in the Republic have relatives and friends in Northern Ireland, so it would present no difficulty for them to claim that they have been resident in Northern Ireland for the specified three months.

I would simply argue that, first, the clause is no deterrent; secondly, that it is inconsistent with the holistic approach that the Government are attempting to take, despite the fact that there is no joined-up government in Cabinet meetings; and thirdly, that there is no holistic approach to the idea that the United Kingdom is an integrated whole. I am pleased to see Ministers taking copious notes and listening carefully. I expect the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), whose constituency almost abuts mine, to respond fully to the points that and my hon. Friends and I have made.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I do not wish to detain the House long.

I have listened with great care and interest to the arguments, particularly those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire). My hon. Friend made some extremely valid points about the risk that is posed to people who are citizens of Ulster, Northern Ireland, who have to be away from their residences for three months for family or business reasons. Such practical considerations will put those people at a disadvantage in comparison with other citizens of this country.

Mr. Maclean: I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend so early in his remarks, but I think that he is making an error that I have made. The test for qualification is not whether such people are away for the entire three months, but whether their residency of three months is interrupted for any short period. Therefore, somebody intending to live in Northern Ireland for a few months on attachment who returns to Great Britain for a week's course will lose the residency qualification. The provision is even more iniquitous than I thought.

Mr. Howarth: My right hon. Friend makes a forceful point, which the Government must answer. The Minister is a reasonable man and will want to deal comprehensively with it.

The economy of Northern Ireland has been doing well for some time and it is not fair that the people there should be penalised simply because the Government want to ensure some modicum of protection against citizens of the Republic of Ireland flooding across the border, swamping the register and bringing about undesirable changes out of expediency.

It is extraordinary that, when we are trying to normalise the situation in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland people should continue to have to bear such a burden and be handicapped unlike any other part of the United Kingdom. There is some force to the argument advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne that they are second-class citizens.

Mr. Bercow: One of the difficulties with this debate is that the longer that we discuss the salient matters, the more potential objections to the Government's proposals seem to emerge. Is it my hon. Friend's understanding that, under the clause as it stands, there is no distinction

[Mr. Bercow]

between, on the one hand, an interruption of the three-month period that could reasonably have been expected to be anticipated, and on the other, an interruption that could not be so anticipated?

Mr. Howarth: The wording is clear: there is no distinction. A person must be resident in Northern Ireland for the entire three months, ending on the relevant date, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border said. If an elector is away for any part of that three-month period, he will suffer disfranchisement, which all of us in the House obviously regard extremely seriously.

I also have sympathy with the point made by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross). I have felt for many years that it is simply not right that citizens of a country that is not part of the Commonwealth, does not acknowledge Her Majesty the Queen as head of state and owes no allegiance to this country should nevertheless enjoy the privilege—for indeed it is a privilege—of voting in our local and parliamentary elections.

We are faced with a predicament precisely because we have for years without any foundation allowed people in the Republic of Ireland to enjoy such a privilege. The clause was drafted to afford some protection from gerrymandering that could bring about a sharp change in policy or, heaven forbid, the constitution of Northern Ireland.

Both options before the House are unattractive. It is unattractive to have special arrangements for our fellow citizens, who are equally loyal subjects of Her Majesty the Queen, and that they should suffer such a handicap, but it is right and proper that we should protect our fellow countrymen in Northern Ireland from a sudden influx of people from the Republic who have moved to Northern Ireland for the express purpose of robbing it of its constitution and bringing about change that would not be acceptable to its residents.

8 pm

We are faced with two options: to continue with the present arrangements, which handicap our fellow citizens in Northern Ireland but provide them with the protection that I have outlined; or to sweep away that protection but ensure that people do not lose their franchise in Northern Ireland if they interrupt their three-month residency requirement. On balance, sadly, I would not support the amendment, not because I do not agree with the principle—I agree with almost everything that my right hon. Friends have said tonight—but because the consequences would be a greater disadvantage to our fellow citizens in Northern Ireland.

Ministers must tell the people why we continue to perpetuate the right of citizens of the Republic of Ireland to vote in this country when they owe no allegiance to it or to Her Majesty the Queen and are not even entitled to the protection afforded to all of us who hold a British passport. The situation is anomalous and, I believe, wrong. I do not intend to support my right hon. Friends on the amendment, so I hope that Ministers will do me the courtesy of offering me some reassurance that they will try to engineer a state of affairs whereby we do not have to handicap our fellow citizens in Northern Ireland in order to provide them with protection against a concerted political assault from citizens of the Republic.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I understand the arguments of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and his desire that the electoral registration system should be as free of inconsistencies across the United Kingdom as is reasonable in the circumstances, but the fact is that special circumstances apply in Northern Ireland, and the three-month residency requirement reflects that. It serves a useful purpose in ensuring that only bona fide registrations are made.

More important, it is well worth pointing out that none of the Northern Ireland parties have asked for the requirement to be removed, even though the Bill would have provided an excellent opportunity to do that. The comments of the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) reflected that. The working party on electoral procedures had the chief electoral officer for Northern Ireland, Pat Bradley, as one of its members, and he did not recommend removing the requirement. As those most concerned seem happy with the existing position, I see no reason to change it.

Mr. Maclean: Does the Minister share the view of the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) that there is a real risk of the register being flooded with people who are not normally resident in Northern Ireland if we do not have the three-month qualification?

Mr. O'Brien: I am not sure that anyone is arguing that there is a risk of floods of voters coming in, but there is sensitivity to voting issues in Northern Ireland, and the provisions have been law since 1949. The right hon. Gentleman described the rules relating to who can vote and I remind him that in national elections British people, Irish people and people from the Commonwealth can vote, and in local and European elections British-registered voters and Commonwealth, Irish and European Union people can vote.

The right hon. Gentleman described the way in which certain people from the Irish Republic can vote in British elections as an obscenity and an outrage. That obscenity and outrage existed during 18 years of Conservative government and there was not a peep out of him during that whole period. That says enough about the approach that he has taken. I appreciate what is happening today, but perhaps he should not engender more indignation than he can conveniently contain.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) also suggested that the rules take away certain people's right to vote. He, too, did not seem to be concerned about the matter when his party was in government. The position has existed since 1949.

Mr. Wilshire *rose—*

Mr. O'Brien: Will the hon. Gentleman bear with me for a moment?

Given the situation in Northern Ireland, we need to proceed with some care.

Mr. Wilshire *rose—*

Mr. O'Brien: I will give way, if the hon. Gentleman will please bear with me for a moment.

We would be best advised to proceed with care, and that is the approach that we intend to take.

Mr. Wilshire: I wanted to intervene only because of the comments that the Minister made about me and my position over the past 18 years. If he can find a moment in a busy day to check the record, he will find that I have been a public and vociferous critic of the way in which Northern Ireland has been treated by all Governments since I have been a Member of Parliament. I did indeed make the same criticisms when my party was in government.

Mr. O'Brien: If the hon. Gentleman tells me that he has done that, I will certainly accept his word.

Various comments have been made and I do not want to go through them all. You said, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that many of them bordered on being out of order. I am sure that you would have dealt with them had they been out of order. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and others made various comments about Irish voters in Britain and I am sure that the large number of people of Irish heritage who vote in the UK will be well acquainted with his views.

The best contribution was from the hon. Member for East Londonderry, who said that he was a little bit worried that floods of Unionists might come to North Warwickshire to deal with me during the election. I look forward to that, and I will think long and hard about his suggestions as a result of that comment.

I hope that the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border will withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Maclean: I am placed in a difficult position, because I had intended to follow my instinct and press the amendment to a vote, and I am not persuaded by the Minister, but I have to pay close attention to the earnest concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross).

I want to clarify one point that the Minister mentioned. I think it an awful anomaly that citizens of the Irish Republic should be able to vote in our elections, but the obscenity is not that mere fact but the fact that citizens of the United Kingdom, born and brought up in the United Kingdom, who have perhaps served in the police, the RUC or the armed forces, or as teachers or nurses in Belfast, can lose their franchise if they come to this country for a week's course, for cancer treatment or on attachment for two or three weeks.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) for drawing my attention to the point that, if those people fail to be resident for the whole of the period, they lose their right to be on the register and are disenfranchised, while someone passing through from the Republic of Ireland has the vote. Putting those two together is the juxtaposition: not the fact that aliens have the right to vote, but that British citizens will lose it through no fault of their own. Putting those two together is the obscenity.

I was greatly interested by what my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry had to say, which is why I asked the Minister to clarify whether he agreed with him that there is the real risk that, unless we have the three-month qualification, some people from the Republic may—perhaps flood was the wrong word—register falsely and have a vote to which they are not entitled. The Minister was using a good Home Office brief, with the points to take and some that were to be used only if pressed. He picked his words carefully. He did not say, "Yes, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Lots of Irish Republican citizens will be flooding the register." He did not use those words but, by the substance of the careful and sensitive words that he used in the present sensitive situation, he was agreeing that my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry was right.

Mr. Mike O'Brien *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Maclean: The Government must be agreeing. There must be the risk. That is the only reason why they are maintaining it. Yes, the Government can hide behind the fact that all the parties in Northern Ireland still want the provision. The Government clearly share the view that there is a risk.

I am faced with an awful dilemma. Here we have an injustice—it is an injustice that people in Northern Ireland have to have the residency qualification when the rest of us and aliens from another state do not. However, because the political parties in Northern Ireland see an even greater injustice in the register being flooded by those aliens who may influence their vote, they wish to keep it. Surely the only way to remedy the problem in future is to impose similar conditions on the rest of us in the United Kingdom, so that we can equalise that injustice to Northern Ireland citizens.

I have listened carefully to the Minister, who replied carefully. I would not find his arguments on their own convincing or persuasive—

Mr. O'Brien: Let the record show that the right hon. Gentleman's interpretation of my comments is not necessarily one that I precisely share. Let my comments speak for themselves in *Hansard.*

Mr. Maclean: The Minister's comments will speak for themselves, but I can see the headlines when *The Times*, *The Telegraph* and Peterborough write up the essence of the Minister's remarks tomorrow. It will be, "Minister says danger of southern Irish citizens flooding register in north." That is what he said in essence, although he picked his words carefully.

In view of the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and for East Londonderry that an even greater injustice would be caused to citizens in northern Ireland if the amendment were agreed, I will reluctantly withdraw it, but I urge the Government to remove that injustice by another means.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 3

RESIDENCE FOR PURPOSES OF REGISTRATION: GENERAL

8.15 pm

Mr. Maclean: I beg to move amendment No. 46, in page 5, leave out lines 7 to 9.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 5, in page 5, line 7, after 'the', insert 'verifiable'.

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

No. 57, in page 5, leave out lines 10 to 14.

No. 6, in page 5, line 22, leave out 'six' and insert 'three'.

No. 7, in page 5, line 32, leave out 'temporary'.

No. 8, in page 5, line 32, after 'unemployment', insert 'of less than 3 months'.

Mr. Maclean: I have moved the amendment on behalf of the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), who tabled it. He has apologised that he cannot be here to do so.

Through this amendment and the related amendment No. 57, which suggest that certain words should be deleted, we seek clarification from the Government as to why they are included and about the detail of what they mean. Clause 3, line 7 reads:

"Regard shall be had, in particular, to the purpose and other circumstances, as well as to the fact, of his presence at, or absence from, the address on that date."

Mr. Forth: That is garbage.

Mr. Maclean: It may be, but it is probably grammatically correct. What does that sentence mean? I confess that I do not know. I have an inkling of what I think that it may mean. I know what, "Regard shall be had" means. What about, "in particular"? If regard is to be had, in particular, what are all the other circumstances that the Government have in mind? Will the Minister explain these particular ones? What about

"to the purpose and other circumstances . . . of his presence at, or absence from, the address on that date"?

I think that the Minister would agree that the sentence is opaque.

I am certain that the Minister, who is kindly with us on secondment again from the Northern Ireland Office—I think that he called it unpaid day release last week, or something of the sort—

Mr. Gerald Howarth: No fixed fee.

Mr. Maclean: Yes—on transfer for no fixed fee.

I welcome the Minister's presence. He is always kind and courteous at the Dispatch Box and always seeks to elucidate where he can. I am certain that, if his brief has been prepared by the people whom I think prepared it in the Home Office—meaning no disrespect to the excellent Northern Ireland Office—it will contain some excellent detail. Admittedly, some of our legislation ended up in judicial review in the High Court—that is always a penalty of Home Office legislation. Nevertheless, the Minister's brief is likely to explain the circumstances.

What are the facts? I suspect that much of the brief will be available to be put into the public domain, or put on the record, if an hon. Member asks. I suspect that little will be in the "If pressed" category and there may be nothing in the category at the bottom of the brief headed, "Not to be revealed in any circumstances."

I simply ask the Minister, on behalf of the hon. Member for East Londonderry, what exactly those three lines mean and what other matters the Government have in mind that are not included by the words, "in particular"?

The amendments also suggest the deletion of lines 10 to 14. Those read:

"For example, where at a particular time a person is staying at any place otherwise than on a permanent basis, he may in all the circumstances be taken to be at that time—

(a) resident there if he has no home elsewhere, or

(b) not resident there if he does have a home elsewhere."

That seems an extraordinary catch-all. No doubt the lawyers who drafted the clause know exactly what it means. The Minister, with his excellent brief and sharp mind, will know what it means, but it seems like gobbledegook to me and I would be grateful for an explanation. I see that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who is no doubt learned in a non-House of Commons, technical, nomenclatural sense, will be able to advise me.

Mr. Forth: I am afraid that I have to disappoint my right hon. Friend. To try to help him, I took up the explanatory notes provided by the Government. However, the notes for this clause simply use the same words. They state:

"The subsection provides that a person who is staying somewhere other than on a permanent basis may be regarded as resident if he does not have a home elsewhere."

Those sound suspiciously like the words that my right hon. Friend read from the Bill. It looks as though we are again trapped by the circularity that is becoming the hallmark of this badly drafted legislation.

Mr. Maclean: I hear what my right hon. Friend says. I hope that the Home Office has not become so afraid of judicial review under the new Government that the explanatory memorandums are merely copying the exact words in the Bill lest some clever clogs should take the Department to court. However, I would not entirely agree with my right hon. Friend that the Bill is badly drafted. We may discover that in due course. I suspect that it is an obscurely drafted Bill. That is often not the fault of departmental officials, who send away a technical brief that anyone—certainly a Minister—can understand, but get back something from the parliamentary draftsman that no one can understand.

Mr. Bercow: Is my right hon. Friend of the view that, if the meaning of the provision is that an individual is not resident there if he has a home elsewhere, it means also that, if he has a home elsewhere, he is judged to be permanently resident at that other home, notwithstanding the temporary interruption? If so, does it not appear that the wording of that provision conflicts directly with the proposal on page 2 to which we referred a moment ago?

Mr. Maclean: My hon. Friend's explanation of what the proposal seems to mean appears to be correct, and may be the only explanation. I should like to hear from the Minister whether my hon. Friend has come to the correct interpretation. If he has, there would, prima facie, seem to be a conflict with clause 2.

Mr. Fabricant: I must confess that I am confused. Is my right hon. Friend arguing that he supports the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), under which the whole clause would be removed because it is gobbledegook? Or is he

arguing in favour of the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), under which the gobbledegook would be improved by the addition of the word "verifiable"—which, to me, makes it even gobbledegooker?

Mr. Maclean: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, but I will leave the other amendments to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. For simplicity's sake, I am dealing with the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for East Londonderry. The amendment must be phrased in such a way as to draw attention to what my hon. Friend calls gobbledegook. It is not possible to table an amendment to ask the Minister to explain that passage, so one must use the parliamentary device of proposing to delete lines 7 to 14.

I would not propose to push the amendment to the vote—unless the Minister's explanation horrifies me—as my intention is not to delete the lines, but to seek information and elucidation. I have every confidence that the Minister will be able to provide that.

Mr. Forth: I will pick up the baton from my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) at this point.

I was upset when my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) indicated that my amendment was of less than complete value before I had even had a chance to explain it. He will be listening attentively, as always, as I try to explain it. A number of our amendments seek to make the Bill more secure and, therefore, to enhance it. This amendment is probably the least important of that group, but it has its own validity.

Clause 3 states:

"Regard shall be had, in particular, to the purpose and other circumstances, as well as to the fact, of his presence at, or absence from, the address on that date."

However, as soon as one introduces the concept of "the fact", there is a duty to establish whether it is a fact or not.

Mr. Fabricant: I hesitate to argue with my right hon. Friend—for whom normally I have the greatest respect—but is it not usually the case that when one attests to a fact, one must verify it? Therefore, the amendment to introduce the word "verifiable" is a gross tautology.

Mr. Forth: I hope that that is not the case. I am barely scratching at the surface of my argument, so my hon. Friend should not rush too quickly to call me to account. If he is patient, he might be prepared to agree with me. If not, he will no doubt seek to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and give the reasons why.

I may not have selected the right word—the House knows how I struggle to find my words—in calling for a "verifiable" fact. I have tried to establish that there should be incumbent on the registration officer an additional procedure, through which he will seek to verify what is claimed in the process of registration by the person seeking that registration.

We are talking about a new, dynamic register—of which I have not been fully persuaded—so there is a greater requirement for verification at every part of the process. Otherwise, we will introduce a dynamic, but highly inaccurate and vulnerable register, rather than one that is tight and secure. I hope that the Minister will agree that adding the word "verifiable" will give greater security to the process than would otherwise be the case. We do not know from the present wording how "the fact" is to be established or proved. Surely we cannot go too far in seeking to make our electoral register as secure as possible, and we shall return to this theme again and again.

Mr. Bercow: Is my right hon. Friend distinguishing between a fact being verifiable and a fact having been verified? There is surely a significant difference between the two. Will he explain whether his concern is that something should be capable of verification and whether, for example, we are to rely upon documents or circumstantial evidence? Or is he making the highly unlikely suggestion for a libertarian Conservative of his high credentials that there should be direct investigation of the whereabouts of particular individuals applying for the list on the date in question?

8.30 pm

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend has, as ever, gone to the nub of the argument with unerring accuracy, and he forces me to come down on one side or other of the fence that he has erected. In this case, I would be prepared to leave it, as we must when considering a Bill of this kind, to the expertise, dedication and discretion of the registration officer to decide the precise mechanisms to be used to verify the contents of the register. My hon. Friend has conjured up a nightmare vision of registration officers acting as though they were Customs and Excise officers—*[Interruption.]* I thought that that would shock my hon. Friends: it was intended to because I wanted to wake them up. We must avoid that approach, but it is important to ensure that registration officers possess the necessary mechanisms to do the job. I hope that I have done enough to satisfy my hon. Friend.

Mr. Brady: My right hon. Friend appears to be setting out a burden of proof which is just as great to demonstrate the presence of a person in his home as it is to demonstrate his absence. I think that that is wrong, because one should be able to state that one was present in one's home and have that accepted as a fact. If registration officers wish to prove one's absence, that should be verifiable.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is leading me into ethereal territory—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. That is the last thing we want.

Mr. Forth: In that case, I shall return—

Mr. Bercow: May I attempt to assist my right hon. Friend by encapsulating the solution to the conundrum that he poses? Does he agree that for this purpose, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence?

Mr. Forth: We are making progress.

Mr. Fabricant: I do not wish to complicate matters, or to introduce a Venn diagram in the manner of my hon.

[Mr. Fabricant]

Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), but surely what he was trying to say was that it is impossible to ask, "Hands up those children who are not here."

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that this is a debate, not a question and answer session. If the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) wishes to conduct a tutorial, I am sure that he could see his hon. Friends afterwards.

Mr. Forth: Indeed I will, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is a complicated argument about difficult concepts and it arose because we were exploring the meaning of the word "verifiable" in the context of amendment No. 5. However, I concede that we may have over-complicated the issue. We have probably teased enough out of it to give the Minister the opportunity to clarify the matter. He has followed the argument with ever more glazed eyes, but a useful brief may come to his assistance at any moment. I am confident that he will not need it.

I shall move on rapidly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I try to be aware of your facial expressions and body language. Amendments Nos. 6, 7 and 8 cover different territory and we are, mercifully, out of the area of concept and into the area of numbers. Amendment No. 6 is a probing amendment. Clause 3 states:

"For the purpose of determining whether a person is resident in a dwelling on the relevant date for the purposes of section 4 above, his residence in the dwelling shall not be taken to have been interrupted by reason of his absence in the performance of any duty arising from or incidental to any office, service or employment held or undertaken by him if . . . he intends to resume actual residence within six months of giving up such residence, and will not be prevented from doing so by the performance of that duty".

Amendment No. 6 suggests that the period should be three months, and I invite the Minister to explain why it should be six months. I believe that three months would be more appropriate, but I am open to persuasion. I am confident that the Minister will be able to persuade us of his reasons, but I would like them to be put on the record.

Mr. Fabricant: Is my right hon. Friend as confused as I am? Earlier in the debate, the number of months necessary to establish residency in Northern Ireland was put at three, but the number of months in clause 3 is six. We heard earlier about inconsistencies between the laws in Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, but this is an inconsistency between one part of the Bill and another.

Mr. Forth: I do not wish to pre-empt the Minister's explanation, but the three months mentioned in the earlier debate about Northern Ireland related to the length of time that one must be able to establish residency before being able to register, but in this case we are talking about how long someone can be away from his established address but still remain validly registered. In the context of the new, dynamic, rolling register, six months may be too long if we wish to guarantee the reliability, validity and security of the register.

We are launching ourselves into an experiment in democracy. I am not convinced that we need the Bill at all—although I do not wish to pre-empt my speech on Third Reading—but if we are to have this misbegotten, ill-thought-out and unnecessary measure, we must do what we can to make the register secure. We must be able to guarantee to the electorate that the new process will be tamper proof and cannot be misused.

Mr. Gray: My right hon. Friend is persuasive, but I am puzzled by his argument. I can imagine many circumstances in which people—such as officers and other ranks in the Merchant Navy, or those serving in the Army, Royal Air Force or Royal Navy—would be absent from home for longer than three months, if not six months. Should not the amendment increase the time that a person is permitted to be away from home without being taken off the register?

Mr. Forth: I accept that point. I am not aware that there are special arrangements for the military.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Forth: The Under-Secretary of State is nodding. I am not surprised. The arrangements are probably buried somewhere in a schedule—*[Interruption.]* He confirms that. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) makes a good point, which we should always bear in mind, but most military people often take the opportunity of proxy votes, postal votes or whatever. However, it would be useful if the Minister said a few words about the matter when he replies to the debate.

I come to the next provision that we are seeking to probe through a little amendment. Clause 3(4) says:

"For the purposes of subsection (3) above"—

the one that we have just been considering—

"any temporary period of unemployment shall be disregarded."

That worries me. When I see a term such as "temporary" in this context in a Bill, I wonder whether it is the proper word to use. It gives rise to enormous potential for interpretation by different registration officers. It is possible that the Minister will want to tell me that the provision will be more closely specified in regulations. That would be half an argument.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my right hon. Friend share my suspicion—nay, cynicism—that the inclusion of "temporary" with regard to unemployment might be an example of the politicisation of the Home Office?

Mr. Forth: I do not think that I share my hon. Friend's view. It is just sloppy drafting, not a conspiracy. It is a cock-up, which happens so often these days, I regret to say, even in something as important as legislation. The use of a term as variable and as open to diverse interpretation as "temporary" is unwise in such a Bill. That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border and I have suggested in our amendment that we insert a period of unemployment of less than three months. It would put beyond doubt and beyond interpretation what the registration officer should have in mind when he does his necessary work and verifies the register's contents. I should like to think that the Minister will accept the amendment. I will not die in the last ditch

over it at this stage. If he were to tell me that the period of three months was not right, but some other period was, I would go along with him.

If we leave a word such as "temporary" in the Bill, how would that provide sufficient security in the nationwide implementation of the measure, were it ever to come to that? Indeed, does it provide sufficient guidance for either local authorities when they contemplate pilot schemes, or registration officers when they have to implement the provision? I do not believe that it does.

We are pursuing a constant theme, to which we will return during discussion of future groups of amendments: is there sufficient tightness, sufficient security, in all the measures to make them reliable and effective? That is the thrust of my argument.

Mr. Bercow: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Forth: I will, but I am trying to conclude.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way as he seeks to conclude his argument. Does he agree that it would not be mere cynicism, but justified apprehension on our part to consider that the clause's failure to define the meaning of the word "temporary" for that purpose might indicate the Government's intention to allow themselves maximum flexibility in the regulations? Although that might be good news for Ministers, it could be a source of growing anxiety to hundreds of electoral registration officers throughout the country.

Mr. Forth: That has to be the case. As my hon. Friend spoke, another thought flitted across my mind. I will try to dismiss it because I doubt that it could be true—but it is just possible that, were unemployment to start to rise dramatically from the level that, mercifully, it is at present, that would have a severe impact on the clause and on its implementation, constituency by constituency, registration officer by registration officer. It is one thing to frame such legislation in the happy circumstances in which we find ourselves in terms of unemployment at the moment, but we are legislating for a long period. As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, anything that is put in the Bill will, by definition, exist for quite some time. You know better than me that changing primary legislation is not easy. Therefore, we must feel triply reassured about whatever appears in the Bill.

Those are the questions that I pose. We want to be helpful; we want to be flexible. Conservative Members are not being dogmatic. However, we are looking for the Minister's analysis, reasoning and explanation of those provisions in the Bill, either accepting our amendments or giving us cast-iron reassurances that the unhappiness that I have expressed is groundless and that that part of the Bill is secure. That is what I am looking for.

8.45 pm

Mr. Wilshire: Before you took the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker, your predecessor had to listen to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). I did not raise this as a point of order at the time, because it would have stopped the flow of a very important debate. My hon. Friend used the word "gobbledegooker" and your predecessor in the Chair could not see the eyes of the *Hansard* writer above you roll upwards at the use of a word that does not exist. Did the previous Deputy Speaker indicate whether some guidance could be given, or whether my hon. Friend should be asked to provide a spelling for the word, because otherwise we will have some difficulty?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I suggest that the hon. Member would do better to stick to the amendment.

Mr. Wilshire: I take your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but this was a difficult point in a difficult debate. However, as you say, there are important amendments before us which we must consider and, if necessary, vote on. As my right hon. Friends the Members for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) both explained, we are dealing with six separate amendments. Although they are related, they raise five individual, but linked, issues. It is important to consider each of those five issues carefully and separately.

When moving amendment No. 46, my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border said that it was a probing amendment. He said, quite rightly, that we wanted the Minister to explain why this provision had been included in the Bill. We should also consider why it is not sufficient to stick to the facts. The subsection provides that we must consider the purpose of someone's presence or absence as well as the facts. I always thought that legislation aimed at being clear and precise and at sticking to the point. Someone is either present or they are not; they are either absent or they are not. The reason why is not the issue. As I understand it, the electoral register seeks to determine someone's residence. We could get locked into an argument about why people choose to live where they do as a purpose for being there. Surely that is not the issue.

Why are the facts of the matter not sufficient? Why do we have to wander into the issue of the purpose of presence or absence? What does the Minister mean by "purpose"? The Bill is not satisfied with the purpose alone—it states that regard shall be had

"in particular, to the purpose".

As my right hon. Friend said, that raises the opportunity to include all sorts of other things, as well as purpose. If the Minister considers it necessary to specify that the purpose is relevant, why does he not tell us which other issues are relevant? Why not spell them out? He chooses to spell out "purpose"—why have the catch-all of "in particular", which allows the Bill to introduce anything else? Does the Minister have anything else in mind?

Mr. Bercow: Rare are the occasions upon which I diverge in my opinions on these matters from those of my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire). But does he agree that the inclusion of "purpose" is not in itself objectionable; it is the fact that the Government have so far failed—it is a risible failure—to specify the difference between good reasons and bad, and to distinguish between circumstances that could be anticipated by a resident and those that could not?

Mr. Wilshire: I am saddened that my hon. Friend does not go with the flow of my argument. I would be inclined to share his point of view unless I were given a good reason for the word's inclusion. The whole thing is very

[Mr. Wilshire]

curious and difficult. The Government are asking me to support in legislation the concept that, even if people are present somewhere, it could be said that they are not. Alternatively, we are being asked to accept legislation that provides that, even if people are absent, if they can give a good enough explanation, they can be said to be present. That is the most extraordinary concept to introduce into legislation.

Although my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) described the amendment as probing, I am slightly disappointed; the amendment should be for real. The gobbledegook to which my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield referred applies to this matter. Why can we not simply stick to the facts? If we accepted amendment No. 46, we should be left with the facts; that should be sufficient for British legislation.

Mr. Gray: I do not want to do the Minister's job for him. I am sure that he will deal with this point shortly. However, one might imagine circumstances in which a person lives at a particular address for the specific purpose of registering to vote. There could be widespread corruption; for example, people might move to a key marginal seat for two or three months—three months in this case—to change the voting outcome there. It would be right for the registration officer to take account of people's purpose in being in an area when considering their application for registration. It is harder to imagine why people should specifically want to be absent and why the registration officer should take account of that.

Mr. Wilshire: That is a valid point. If the House supports my hon. Friend's view, it is incumbent on the Government to state which purposes they would accept as good. My hon. Friend gives an example of a practice that, I hope, is not acceptable; it would be a bad purpose. To state only that purposes can be taken into account does not meet the concern expressed by my hon. Friend. If we accept my hon. Friend's argument, the Government will need to introduce further amendments in the other place.

Amendment No. 5 would come into play if amendment No. 46 were to fail. I am a politician who likes to think well of my opponents, so I have great hope in the Government. I am sure that the reasonableness of the intricate arguments put by my right hon. and hon. Friends during the past few minutes will have persuaded the Minister of the justice of our cause, and that we will not need to invoke amendment No. 5. However, in case we need to do so, we should discuss it.

Mr. Fabricant: I put to my hon. Friend the same question that I asked my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth): does he agree that the insertion of the word "verifiable" is tautology? The word used in the clause is "fact". Do not all facts have to be verifiable, by definition?

Mr. Wilshire: I was coming to that point as gently as I could. I suspect that the discussion is coming off the rails, because my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) has difficulties with some of my arguments and I have some difficulties with the arguments of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield. Amendment No. 5—to insert the word "verifiable"—will be essential if amendment No. 46 does not succeed. That is because our society is based on the rule of law—that is how our system operates. I am not a lawyer, but I understand the rule of law to be the ability to prove an asserted fact. If that is so, there needs to be verifiable purpose. I could not go along with the concept that, in a matter that is as serious as the representation of the people, all one has to do is explain something and one's word will be accepted.

Mr. Fabricant: If my hon. Friend is correct, and he uses that argument to support the insertion of the word "verifiable", would it not be necessary to use the word "verifiable" every time the word "fact" or any other condition is mentioned in a Bill? Clearly, that is not so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should address the Chair.

Mr. Wilshire: I am grateful for the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield. There are a further 13 groups of amendments, which do not include the word "verifiable", to be debated tonight, but if he tables amendments on a future occasion, I should be happy to debate whether that was verifiable.

Amendment No. 57 deals with the difficult issue of those without a permanent address. I should be grateful if, before we vote on the matter, the Minister would tell us whether, when we are talking about whether a person has a permanent address, we are talking about whether they have a permanent address in the United Kingdom or a permanent address anywhere. If a person has a permanent address outside the country but enters the country and says, "I have no permanent address here", the Bill does not make it clear whether the qualification of no permanent address would apply.

Another concern that I have about the issues addressed by amendment No. 57 is the fact that I see in a Bill the words "for example". If there is a lawyer in the House at the moment, perhaps that lawyer—or the Minister—will explain whether a colloquial throwaway comment such as "for example" has any place in legislation and could be taken before a court for judicial review, because I rather think that "for example" should come as a footnote. In my 13 years in the House, I have never come across legislation with footnotes. I have seen many a Select Committee report with a "for example" tucked at the bottom, but never in legislation have I seen such a device.

Mr. Maclean: The words "for example" have been used in legislation—that is, much legislation includes lists of types of things. However, perhaps my hon. Friend should ask the Minister to explain whether the sui generis rule applies in this case and, by quoting these examples, whether other categories of the same generic family would also be included or excluded. That is the important point.

Mr. Wilshire: That was a fascinating intervention. I should be grateful to hear the answer.

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend may not have noticed that the Minister appeared to be nodding assent to the suggestion that the sui generis rule applies.

Mr. George Howarth: No, I nodded off.

Mr. Wilshire: My admiration for the Minister knows no bounds if he actually understood the detail of those

interventions well enough, as a non-lawyer, to explain to me what we have been discussing for the last few moments, because I could not get my mind around it.

This is all about the question, when is permanence permanence and when is non-permanence non-permanence? I do not find that difficult. What we are seeking to do, if I may say "for example", is to draw a distinction between a person who lives on a park bench for months on end and a person who is chucked out for a night by his wife and has to spend the night on a park bench. That is an example of what we are trying to do.

However, it occurs to me that a problem arises from trying to draw such distinctions, because if someone says, "I live on a park bench", that is a non-residence, unless the person is resident somewhere else. Perhaps we need to consider what happens if the other place is also a non-residence. If someone sleeps on this park bench or that park bench, does having two park benches mean that one of them is the alternative place of residence, and therefore the provision does not apply?

The Minister may think that I am being foolish, but I am trying to save the taxpayer money because, if we do not clarify the matter now, judicial review looms on what is permanent and what is not. If we clarify the matter now, we shall save the taxpayer the enormous legal fees involved in letting the courts sort it out later.

Mr. Maclean: I can give my hon. Friend a better example from a real case, not just what may be regarded as a facetious or spurious case involving people on park benches. When the Newbury protesters were taken to court by the police and the Transport Department, the courts ruled that the holes in the ground, or tree-house, in which the protesters were living amounted to a place of residence, and they were bailed to return to their residence—the piece of land that they were demonstrating on. That demonstration is irrelevant to my hon. Friend's argument, but the point is that a residence can be a tree-house or a hole in the ground, as ruled by the courts in Newbury.

Mr. Wilshire: That reinforces my feeling that we must clarify the matter before we give the Bill a Third Reading.

I move on to amendment No. 6. If I understand it, the Bill addresses the issue of how long a person can be away from somewhere without its mattering. The Bill says six months, but the amendment would make it three. That suggests to me that we spent an entirely futile two hours discussing whether in Northern Ireland somebody should be resident for three months before going on to the register. Even though we had that discussion and accepted that provision, we are now saying that it does not matter. I hope that the Minister will tell us which period applies. Is it the one that we discussed earlier or the one that we are discussing now? I see nowhere in the clause the words, "Notwithstanding the references to residence in Northern Ireland". Does the clause refer to the residency test in Northern Ireland? If it does, it should say so. If it does not, why did we have the earlier debate?

9 pm

Another issue is short-term unemployment. As was said earlier, the word "temporary" should be defined. As a non-lawyer, I am amazed that the drafters of the legislation could use what I consider to be such a sloppy word. If I were unemployed for three years and then got a job, I could say that it was only a temporary period in my life.

I know what the Government were trying to do. They were trying to catch the sense of "short term". That would have been a better term than "temporary", but both are sloppy.

Mr. Bercow: Is not the intellectual paucity of the Government's position demonstrated by the conflict in their treatment of Northern Ireland on the one hand and the rest of the United Kingdom on the other? A week is a long time when it suits the Government in the context of Northern Ireland, but six months is a short time in the context of the rest of the United Kingdom because that fits in with their predestined purpose. In a nutshell, are not the Government guilty of what the late Winston Churchill would have called "terminological inexactitude"?

Mr. Wilshire: Despite occasional appearances to the contrary, I am a kind and generous man at heart. Unlike my hon. Friend, I prefer to believe that that is just sloppiness, not devious Labour politics of the worst kind. I hope that my generosity to the Minister will be repaid by his telling us that he now realises that it would have made much more sense to specify a period of time rather than to throw out a general term such as "temporary". That would have set my hon. Friend's mind at rest and he would not have had to think the worst about the Labour party's motives.

I could be persuaded that three months was not the period that the Minister had in mind. However, for the purposes of the debate and a vote, let us stick with three months. If he wants us to agree to two or four months, I should also be entirely happy about that.

Mr. Fabricant: I wonder whether the clause could have been better phrased by using the words in the Bill's explanatory notes. If I may read a brief note, they say—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This is an intervention, which must be brief. Will the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) resume his speech?

Mr. Wilshire: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I want to raise one more issue, but my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield may then catch your eye so that he can develop his point.

As well as wondering why the Bill is so sloppily drafted, I am mystified why the concept of unemployment gets dragged into a factual matter, such as whether one qualifies to be on the register. That returns me to the first point that I raised. Surely to goodness, we are dealing with where a person resides, not with whether he has a job. I am wholly puzzled by the fact that the Bill considers what a person does with his time. That is not what the Bill is about; it is about where he lives.

I notice that the Minister has been making careful notes, so I look forward to hearing his answers to my many questions.

Mr. George Howarth: I shall try my best to deal with the points that have been raised, although I suspect that some were made to fill up time rather than to shed enlightenment.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Would it not it have been out of order if there had been a filibuster and would you not have called the House to order if there had been?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman might equally be accused of taking up the time of the House. The Minister was only surmising; it is the Chair who decides.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman knows that I deliberately did not use the word "filibustering".

The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) raised a number of points with which I shall try to deal, but there was an element of metaphysical discourse in his speech, and I am not entirely clear what specific points he was making. It is not entirely clear whether he himself knew exactly what points he was making, but I shall try to respond to those that I could identify.

Before I do so, I shall decline the offer that the hon. Gentleman made a few moments ago when he asked me to put at rest the mind of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow). Having watched the hon. Gentleman for some weeks, I have concluded that his mind is far too fevered for me to put it at rest.

There was some discussion about verifiability between the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). The hon. Member for Lichfield is waiting for a flash of inspiration or enlightenment from me. I have to tell him that verifiability is a word that we all understand, but I suggest that when he has the opportunity he should read the work of Karl Popper, if he has not done so already. I know that the hon. Gentleman is better read than he sometimes appears to be. Karl Popper adds an even more interesting concept to the discussion of verifiability in that he believes that falsifiability is a far better tool. I suggest that when the hon. Gentleman has time, he reads Karl Popper for enlightenment, or revisits his work if he has read it already.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: I shall give way once to the hon. Gentleman and that is all.

Mr. Bercow: We know your strictures, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we respect them, but it is of the utmost importance to understand to what the Minister is referring, because it is relevant to his response to the debate. Is the work to which he is referring to be found in "The Open Society and its Enemies" or in "Conjectures and Refutations"?

Mr. Howarth: It is some years since I have read either of those publications, and I was an undergraduate at the time. The hon. Gentleman will remember that the general philosophy that underlies Popper's approach is that any theory is a good theory only if it is open to falsification. That is relevant to the dialogue between the hon. Member for Lichfield and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, but it would certainly be remiss of me to advise them to discuss that during this debate.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Having sat through the Committee proceedings on the Bill, I assume that the working party did not explore that area. Certainly members from our party did not report that they rose to such philosophical heights.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman is right. As I intend to demonstrate in a moment, the working party stuck to practicalities and matters of interest to people who want to vote, because that is what the Bill is all about.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) requested information on the position of those in military service and merchant seafarers. Even though he has since decamped, I shall clarify the matter for the record. Military personnel register by means of a service declaration. Merchant seamen register under section 6 of the Representation of the People Act 1983, which is not affected by the Bill. I am sure that when the hon. Gentleman avidly reads the record of the debate tomorrow, he will understand the situation.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne embarked on a somewhat convoluted dialogue about the use in legislation of the expression "for example." I am sure that he has already read it, but to make matters clear I draw his attention to a good example of the use of that expression in the Bill. It appears in clause 3(2), which reads:

"Regard shall be had, in particular, to the purpose and other circumstances, as well as to the fact of his presence at, or absence from, the address on that date.

For example, where at a particular time a person is staying at any place otherwise than on a permanent basis, he may in all circumstances be taken to be at that time—

(a) resident there if he has no home elsewhere, or

(b) not resident there if he does have a home elsewhere."

The hon. Gentleman has to concede that the use of the expression "for example" is, in that context, appropriate and enlightening.

Mr. Wilshire: I am afraid that I do not accept that. I was complaining about the use in the Bill of the words "for example." The fact that the Minister can find another example of their use in the Bill does not undermine my argument. My point is that they should not appear anywhere in the Bill, but I would have been out of order had I addressed clauses that we were not debating.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman objects in principle to the use of the words "for example." I was merely demonstrating, by means of yet another example, how it is possible to use that phrase to provide amplification and illustration of a provision.

I recognise that some of those right hon. and hon. Members who tabled the amendments are anxious to ensure that the electoral registration process is not susceptible to false claims and manipulation by those who are sufficiently unscrupulous to attempt them. I respect those views and share that concern, but I do not believe that the amendments would help to achieve that aim.

Even after listening to the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean)—always a great joy—I am somewhat puzzled by amendments

Nos. 46 and 57. It appears that they would provide that residence should be determined solely by a person's presence or otherwise at the relevant address on the day in question. If that were so, a possible interpretation would be that a person who happened to be staying at a friend's house on the day of the annual canvass would register at the friend's address, rather than his own. I do not believe that the confusion of which the right hon. Gentleman spoke exists.

Amendment No. 5 is designed to tighten up the definition of "residence", by introducing the concept of "the verifiable fact". Having already referred to that and to falsifiability, I do not intend to dwell on the subject. However, the right hon. Gentleman was speaking of the verifiable fact of someone's presence at, or absence from, a particular address on a particular date. How would that work? How is someone who lives alone to prove that he was at home on the date in question? If a false claim is made, there are established procedures for objecting to the inclusion of a specific name in the register. Those procedures are used when people believe it appropriate and necessary to use them. In my view, they provide a more appropriate and effective safeguard than the arrangements proposed in the amendment.

Amendments Nos. 6, 7 and 8 are designed to tighten the provisions relating to those who are temporarily absent from home in connection with their employment or business. Under new section 5(3)(a) of the Representation of the People Act 1983, as substituted by clause 3 of the Bill, a person who is so absent can continue to be treated as a resident at his home address, provided he intends to return within six months of leaving home; and new section 5(4) provides that periods of temporary unemployment may be disregarded in that connection. Use of the word "temporary" is accepted: the electoral administrators who were consulted and who participated in the framing of the proposals believe that that is a suitable definition, and I am content that it should remain on the face of the Bill.

9.15 pm

Mr. Brady: In my view, it is acceptable for "temporary" to remain in the Bill, but the Minister should give some indication of what the Government have in mind as the definition of "temporary". They must have a conception of what temporary unemployment means for these purposes.

Mr. Howarth: I have already referred—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman was listening—to people who are temporarily away from their home for the purposes of business. On six months of leaving home, they can be considered for registration. That is not an unreasonable period in terms of being temporarily away from home. It is not necessarily a period of unemployment.

Mr. Brady: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I will give way once more to the hon. Gentleman. Having done so, I must make some progress.

Mr. Brady: We are dealing with an important point that has an impact on other areas of employment law. My concern is the reference in clause 3(4) to "temporary period of unemployment", and the suggestion that that can be disregarded. I accept what the Minister says about temporary absence from home on business, but to say that a temporary period of unemployment can be disregarded, when that period could mean anything from three days to three years, is not acceptable. The Government must give an indication of their thinking on the matter.

Mr. Howarth: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I think that his concern is unnecessary. I do not think that it is necessary for me to state a specific period after which temporary unemployment becomes long-term unemployment. I think that the Department for Education and Employment probably has a definition of when temporary employment becomes full-time employment. Perhaps we can reflect on that subsequently. It is not necessary for us to get into a convoluted argument about that.

Mr. Fabricant: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman because he always provides the House with great entertainment. This will be the last time that I shall give way.

Mr. Fabricant: Why is the time clearly defined in the explanatory notes and not in the Bill?

Mr. Howarth: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, explanatory notes explain what is in a Bill. That is why we provide explanatory notes.

I intend to move on. I understand why Opposition members might want to delay me, but I think I have been more than generous in giving way. I do not think that it would be helpful for me to do so again.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has commented on the use of language. He has been honest enough to say on more than one occasion that he is not entirely convinced of the need for the Bill. As the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) has said, the Bill was conceived as a result of co-operation between the three major parties in the House. I know that the right hon. Gentleman was not included in that process. He has his own view on these matters, and the occupants of the Opposition Front Bench may sometimes consider it to be somewhat wayward. However, I do not question the fact that he has the right to take that approach.

Throughout the process of co-operation, we had the benefit of advice from and the thoughts of electoral administrators. They believe that the arrangements set out in the Bill are useful.

Amendment No. 6 would reduce the maximum period of absence from employment from six months to three. Amendments Nos. 7 and 8 would substitute a maximum period of three months' unemployment for "temporary" unemployment.

I believe that the amendments are unnecessary. The provisions in clause 3 make it simpler for people to register, and clarify the circumstances in which they do so without opening the door to abuse. Given all the advice that we have painstakingly taken, we think that the provisions strike the right balance. I hope that the right hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst and for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) jointly will feel it appropriate to withdraw their amendments.

Mr. Maclean: It is a pleasure to follow the Minister and to hear him explain why the amendments may not be

[Mr. Maclean]

necessary or may be misguided. Casual observers may have regarded the debate of the past hour as tedious or boring. I am sure that the Minister was not one of those. He was courteous, as usual, in paying attention to the important points that have been made, and he is always meticulous in responding properly to debate.

It would clearly be nonsense for me to force a vote on the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) does not wish to press his amendments to a Division because of the generous response from the Minister, which we welcome. As I wish to speak at length on the main business tonight—

Mr. Forth: Does my right hon. Friend accept that it is peculiar for the Minister to tell the House that because a measure has been agreed by all parties, it must be beyond reproach? The House will recall that the Child Support Agency had the support of all parties, and I do not think that any of us are particularly proud of that.

Mr. Maclean: My right hon. Friend is, of course, right. The issues on which the great and the good agree are often the ones about which we should worry. Some Ministers think that if a measure is bounced through in five minutes on a Friday, that is good. I know that the Under-Secretary does not take that view and is always meticulous and courteous. In order that we can crack on and deal with the main group of amendments relating to pilot schemes, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 6

NOTIONAL RESIDENCE: DECLARATIONS OF LOCAL CONNECTION

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I beg to move amendment No. 30, in page 8, line 43, at end insert—

'(5A) Where the declarant falls into the category of person mentioned in subsection 2(c) above, the declaration of local connection must state that the declarant has spent a substantial part of his time (whether during the day or at night) in the parliamentary constituency (or, if the declaration is made for the purpose of local government elections only under the provisions of subsection (6) below, the local government electoral area) during the whole of the period of three months ending on the date of the declaration.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 9, in page 9, line 20, at end insert—

'(10) When an address given in a declaration of local connection is owned or occupied by a person, persons, business or organisation, permission must be obtained from such person, persons, business or organisation for that address to be used in the declaration.'.

No. 31, in page 9, line 20, at end insert—

'(10) When a declaration of local connection is received by the registration officer, he shall make enquiries in order to satisfy himself that the declarant falls within the categories of person listed in subsection (2) above, and no declarant shall be entered on the register until the registration officer is so satisfied.'.

No. 27, in schedule 1, page 20, line 35, at end insert—

'(5A) It shall be the responsibility of the registration officer to take whatever measures he deems necessary and reasonable to verify a declaration of local connection made under section 7B of this Act.'.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak at such an early stage. Amendments Nos. 30 and 31 deal with those seeking to declare a local connection because they are homeless. That is a small group of people, consisting mainly of rough sleepers. I stress to the Minister that we are looking for flexibility and do not want to be dogmatic. We shall put forward common-sense suggestions, which we hope that he will adopt.

As it stands, the Bill is pretty thin in respect of requirements to prove that the elector or would-be elector is who he or she claims to be. The Bill is also not sufficiently prescriptive to bar would-be travelling voters from making tactical decisions about where they will register for voting purposes.

Once the election is called or is about to be called, tactical seats might be earmarked, and registration could take place with the aim of achieving a certain result. The amendments do not aim to be a barrier to legitimate registration, but they aim to be a barrier to protest tactical registration, which I have previously described as the Swampy aspect of the Bill. We must be aware that that could be a problem.

There are sufficient loopholes in the Bill to lead to an increase in fraudulent registration. The amendments will not cut out the fraud entirely, but they will give electoral registration officers powers to satisfy themselves that the declaration is genuine. Amendment No. 30 stipulates that the person making the declaration of local connection has lived in the area for a substantial part of the time during the three-month period. That is not an unsurpassable obstacle to people stating to the electoral registration officer that they have a local connection, have lived in the area and are not just passing through. They must state that they have such a local connection. I do not believe that the rough sleepers whom I pass on my way up Victoria street in the evening would have difficulty in making a local declaration. Many of them are familiar faces, who have local connections for much longer than three months, more is the pity. They would experience no problem with the amendment.

The amendment would make the same provision for England and Wales as clause 6 makes for Northern Ireland.

Mr. Fabricant: I wonder whether my hon. Friend has by-elections in mind. Many by-elections are held within three months of their declaration. To use his Swampy analogy, does he fear that homeless people or others may move into an area where there is a by-election to try to change its usual result?

Mr. Evans: The whole Bill, not only the provisions for by-elections, worries me because it provides for the ability to make that sort of protest at general elections and by-elections. General elections are important and people will be able to use the measure to try to affect the result in a seat that has been earmarked as marginal. Seats tend to be more marginal in general elections than they are in by-elections. Local declarations could be made under the

Bill with the aim of unseating a specific person—for example, a Minister who made an unpopular decision. If the measure is not amended, such a Minister could be at risk.

Voters often use by-elections to make a statement about how the Government are faring. I know that, because I have been the victim of two by-elections. If people agree with most of the Government's actions, they will vote for them in a general election. However, in a by-election, people who disagree strongly with only one policy have the luxury of voting against the Government without bringing them down. An amendment that we tabled earlier dealt specifically with by-elections; amendment No. 30 would affect the whole measure by trying to remove loopholes.

Amendment No. 30 would do nothing more for England and Wales than proposed new section 7B(5) of the 1983 Act, for which clause 6 provides, does for Northern Ireland. That provision states that people who register a declaration of local connection in Northern Ireland must declare that they have lived there for three months. That is sensible, and we want only to extend the provision to all relevant parts of the United Kingdom.

The argument that we discriminate against homeless people as against those who have houses will be prominent in hon. Members' minds because it was mentioned when we tabled an amendment about registration for by-elections. The amendment does not aim to discriminate, but we discern a difference in the means of registering. It would be incredibly expensive to buy a house to influence a vote. I do not believe that anyone would be prepared to do that.

The provision for local declaration makes it much easier to register in order to affect a vote. The only expense incurred is that of getting to a specific place. It is argued that it is easier for people to rent a property to influence a vote. It is easier than buying a house, but finding a rentable property involves expense, commitment and difficulty. Local declarations do not involve such difficulties. People can simply go the local town hall, approach the electoral registration officer and state that they have a local declaration. That requires no commitment or proof of having lived in a place. Under the Bill, someone could get off a local bus at Brighton, take a whiff of the sea air and, all of a sudden, become a local.

9.30 pm

Such a person could register—that would be down to the town hall—so I hope that the Minister is prepared to look carefully at amendments Nos. 30 and 31. Amendment No. 31 would place the onus on the electoral registration officer, who would have to be proactive in ensuring that people who make local declarations do so truthfully. In previous debates on the Bill, it has been said that the ERO and his or her staff would be aware that there was a particular problem and could perhaps take action if a number of people who did not live in the area went there to make fraudulent local declarations. We want to place on the ERO the obligation to verify declarations made by people who say that they have been in a certain place for at least three months and so rightfully have a local, rather than a passing, connection.

The Minister may object, saying that the amendment would place a burden on EROs. We already know that they are strapped for cash, and it may add a disproportionate cost, as I understand that no extra cash will be made available, but we are talking about a relatively small number of people. I asked the chief executive of the local authority in the Ribble Valley area how many homeless people would use the Bill and register with a local declaration. He said none, and I agree.

The same will be true for a lot of rural areas as key urban areas attract the homeless. Property is costly these days and illness is a problem for a lot of homeless people, who are attracted to major cities such as London, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds and Bristol. I do not believe that EROs are inundated to the extent that they would be unable to send a member of staff to make sure that a person who makes a local declaration lives locally.

Mr. Fabricant: Again, I am listening to my hon. Friend's arguments with considerable interest. He will know that Shelter is saying that the number of homeless people is sadly increasing. What assessment has he made of the number of inquiries that might have to be made before an election by an ERO to establish whether someone is resident in a certain area?

Mr. Evans: There may be problems if a number of people are sleeping rough in a given area and an election is called. Once that happens, there is nothing to prevent people from registering a local declaration. We might find that a number of people in certain areas try to register at the town hall, although that would depend on where they are concentrated. I have referred to Victoria street time and again, because that is the area that I know. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) also walks along Victoria street and he, too, will know how many people are sleeping rough there. There will be problems if people wait until the last moment to register their declaration of local connection, particularly as the ERO and his staff will be extremely busy. I hope that local authorities will ensure that they have staff available. Those staff could perhaps come off certain other duties, but not electoral registration, as that would be vital in the run-up to a local election or a general election, should the Home Secretary decide to extend the measure throughout the country. EROs should be able to take some staff off other duties, such as car parking, in order to verify that the person who has declared a local connection has done so correctly.

In places such as Westminster, to which I referred earlier, as many as 100 people may be sleeping rough—perhaps even more. That number would put pressure on the authority. I do not believe that there would be any such pressure on my local authority, and I suspect that my hon. Friend would not encounter too many problems in Lichfield either. The main problem would arise as a result of the Swampy factor.

A number of people may tactically move around the country in order to pick on one large urban constituency. We know that groups of people who live in different parts of the country are now able easily to communicate very quickly on the internet. People who have the same interest and belong to chat groups communicate freely and constantly. Such communication has been used in preparation for demonstrations in London, and we have seen the problems that the police have faced as a result.

Disparate groups of people could easily use the internet. I am referring not to homeless people but to those who will fraudulently claim that they are homeless in order to

[Mr. Evans]

pick on one or two constituencies in which to register. The ERO and his personnel will have problems checking each application.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend touches on something that is bothering me considerably: the question of multiple voting. As there will not be a national register, does he believe that there are sufficient safeguards to ensure that a homeless person does not make a declaration of residence in more than one area?

Mr. Evans: Clearly not. There are sufficient loopholes that not only allow people to do so but, in certain circumstances, may encourage it.

I return to the argument that, if somebody is prepared to dig a hole and stay down it for several days or climb a tree and stay up it for several days as a form of protest, making a local declaration of connection in several local authority areas will be a piece of cake. We must therefore be cautious.

I hope that, if very many people make a declaration once an election is called to try to unseat one Member of Parliament, we shall be able to give the ERO sufficient power to verify whether such claims are legitimate. If proof is given, there should be no problem. The problem will arise when the ERO and his staff find that people are obviously not living in the area and have no local connection. I ask the Minister to take due regard of the abuse that could result from the way in which the clause is drafted.

Mr. Forth: I shall try to be short in my comments on this occasion—

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): I will time the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Forth: If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, I would be delighted to give way, although he would only be prolonging my remarks. I should hope that he would not want to provoke me at this stage in our proceedings. I want to allow as many people as possible to contribute to this part of our debate.

This is the weakest and most vulnerable part of the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) has ably outlined his worries, which I share. The concept of the declaration of local connection is wide open to abuse and it is incumbent on us to minimise that abuse, or eliminate it if we can.

We have just heard the nightmare possibility of people making multiple registrations in different constituencies under the banner of the extremely loose process of declaration of local connection. Amendments Nos. 9 and 27 are designed to reduce the weaknesses and close the loopholes. Amendment No. 9 would require permission to be obtained from the owner or occupier of the address given, be it an individual or a business, the better to verify the use of that address.

The Bill merely requires the person registering to give "the address in the United Kingdom where he would be residing" or, in the case of a homeless person, the address that he "is nearest to". That is open to multiple abuse and we must deal with it properly.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Is there not a slight danger that a political party could go around collecting proxies from 10, 15 or 20 homeless people in a ward and use its political address as the registered address for a postal proxy vote, and thereby skew an election?

Mr. Forth: Yes. Regrettably, there are many such possibilities within the procedure. Amendment No. 9 would not deal with that problem, but amendment No. 27 could or would, because it would lay on the electoral registration officer a duty to verify the local connection. Should the provisions ever reach the statute book, EROs, with their great experience, would want to concentrate on this area, to reassure us that the horrors that we are envisaging will not occur.

The Minister may be able to reassure us in some other way that I cannot yet imagine. I hope that he can. I hope that he will either accept the amendments or give us a guarantee that something of the kind will be introduced, perhaps in another place. I hope that he will do us the courtesy of acknowledging those apparent weaknesses in the Bill, and that he will correct them.

I do not want the briefness of my remarks to detract from the seriousness with which I view the matter, but I want to give others a chance to contribute. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): We will not support the amendment if it is pressed to a vote. I do not doubt the genuine concern of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) about the possible fraudulent exercise of the right to register and to vote, but I wonder whether he has been as concerned in the past about possible fraud by people who have more than one residence and could equally do the things that he is concerned that the homeless might do.

I suspect that someone who is literally roofless would not be as able to take concerted action to register in constituencies that may be vulnerable as someone who owns about five residences. In the past, the homeless have been discriminated against and have not been able to exercise the right to vote. It would be very wrong for us to add more discrimination in very welcome legislation that gives them that right for the first time. The difficulty is going to be persuading people who literally have not got a roof that they want to take part in the democratic process at all.

9.45 pm

Mr. Evans: I agree with all that the hon. Lady is saying. We want the franchise to be extended to homeless people. They have been discriminated against once and we do not want them to be doubly so. Our problem is that, for the first time, legislation is making it easier for people to claim a local connection at the town hall. We want to ensure that safeguards are put in place so that the system is not abused by others—not by the genuine homeless, but by other people who want to make protests.

Jackie Ballard: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but, in putting that sledgehammer in place, he will be discriminating against the very people to whom he wanted to give a right.

As I said, the difficulty will be to persuade people who are roofless that they want to reconnect with the democratic process. That will be a real challenge for all of us and, if the amendment is pressed to a vote, we will oppose it.

Mr. Fabricant: I welcome the provision that will enable the homeless, as well as prisoners on remand and those who live in psychiatric residential centres, to vote. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) said, that provision will mean that the legislation will be open to abuse, which means that democracy itself will be open to abuse.

The Minister said that he is not too concerned if a group of Ulster Unionists moves to north Warwickshire, but we must all be slightly concerned about people who are homeless, or indeed those who are not, registering a local connection in an area when they do not have one. Shelter has said that, sadly, more and more homeless people are living on our streets. One does not have to be homeless to make a declaration of local connection.

As we do not have a national register as such, how will the Minister ensure that people do not make multiple declarations? In Committee, one Labour Member told me that homeless people cannot get to a number of areas to vote. That is patently not so. If one is on the cusp of a number of adjoining constituencies, it is easy to walk into each to vote during a day. What if one is not homeless and is using the internet, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) described? That makes it even more probable that there will be major abuses of democracy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) mentioned Newbury, where tree-houses and tunnels were designated as places of residence. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley mentioned the Swampy syndrome. There is a real probability that we will be inviting abuse if tight clauses are not added to the Bill as my right hon. and hon. Friends have suggested. It is pleasant to see that the amendments in the group are not mutually exclusive. They could all be accepted to ensure that there is no abuse.

There is no question but that there is abuse. Earlier in the passage of the Bill I asked the Minister how many abuses occur. He was unable to tell me. Clearly, they have not been detected. If the Bill is not amended to ensure that owners of properties must say that the individual who makes the declaration of local connection lives there, we shall be inviting the sort of abuse that my right hon. and hon. Friends have described.

We have discussed the question of verifying a number of issues, and we had a long debate about the word "verifiable". Amendment No. 9 is an important amendment. Making a person who owns or occupies a property agree that the declaration of local connection is viable and correct will be a small step towards ensuring that abuses do not happen in the future. If these amendments are not adopted, we will be inviting abuse. Surely that is not what the Minister wants.

Mr. Syms: There are two sides to this question. The first is that people have an absolute right to vote, and the second is that there must be transparency and a right to challenge. The current electoral register is published, and people can check it and their right to be on it. Sometimes, people are open to challenge. If, within a year, somebody missing from the register wants to be added, his name is put up in a local council office or public place so that, in effect, people can challenge that right.

The real problem with homeless people is checking that they have a local connection. This is a problem not only for the returning officer, but for political parties. Many of us in the Chamber could look at several constituencies and say that we have a local connection. In that case, where one votes could be an elective point, rather than a point of residence. That could cause a real problem, and could raise the fears expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans).

The system could be open to abuse—not by the homeless, but by people taking advantage of their political position to scoop up a number of additional votes in a particularly marginal seat. All political parties try to take advantage of the electoral law as it stands to maximise their political performance in any seat. There are abuses in proxy or postal votes. Occasionally, agents of parties are accused of abuses because they have signed up people who may not know what day it is. There is scope for abuse by those who know what they are doing in taking advantage of those who are homeless and on the streets.

An address is a critical point for most of us. We register our address from the point of view of electoral registration, and if we purchase or do anything we are often asked where we live. Often, people check the electoral register. If one wants to join a video club, for example, people will ask for bills, or for some connection with a particular address to verify where one lives. If one does not have that, there is a problem. Political parties across the spectrum may look at an individual and measure whether the local connection is valid and whether that person should be on the electoral register. My fear is that the electoral registration officer will be put in a position whereby somebody wants to be registered and local political agents and parties will object because it cannot be proved that that person has a local connection.

In my constituency, the only people with a good idea of who lives on the streets are local police officers. The only way in which one could prove a local connection would be to get statements from local police officers who, in certain areas of Poole, know the people who are sleeping rough in those areas. I am not sure that those homeless people would want to go to the police for a statement that they are local residents, because there is sometimes an uneasy relationship between them.

I have concerns about this measure. It is well intentioned, but open to abuse. If we are not careful, unscrupulous people could take advantage of the homeless.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have had many lengthy speeches in this and other debates today. Some hon. Members have suggested that there has been some filibustering—heaven forfend—because the Opposition wish to prevent us reaching the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. This is an important amendment, but I should point out that Conservative Front Benchers have not opposed the next business and it would be particularly hypocritical of them to continue to make long-winded speeches. Perhaps they are just naturally given to them; we will see.

Each of the amendments in this group is designed to place obstacles in the way of people wishing to register as electors by means of a declaration of local connection and, in particular, those people who wish to use that route because they are homeless. We will need to work hard to get the homeless to register to vote, let alone fulfil the concerns that have been expressed tonight. The Conservative party was represented on the working party on electoral procedures, but it now appears to be backtracking on what it agreed then.

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

Amendment No. 30 would, in effect, impose a three-month residency qualification on a homeless person seeking to register as provided in the Bill. That raises the question of why the homeless should be treated differently in that respect from all other electors in Great Britain. Does the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) really think that a rent-a-homeless-vote procession would arrive in a constituency having a by-election and make straight for the town hall to register to vote, having been alerted to the need to do so via the internet to which, as homeless people, they would hardly have ready access? The hon. Gentleman seems to have a name for that idiocy—I can call it nothing else—and he calls it the Swampy factor. It would provoke much comment if such a thing were to happen and would damage any party that sought to organise it. It is unlikely to happen and the hon. Gentleman has presented no evidence for it. If he has some evidence, I would be pleased to see it before he pursues his argument further.

My objection applies also to amendment No. 9, which would require the homeless person seeking to use, for example, the address of the shop in whose doorway he normally spends the night, to get the shopkeeper's permission before doing so. If the shopkeeper refused, that person would be disfranchised. I can see no justification for that. The shopkeeper would not be affected because the fact that the homeless person had registered under such an address would not give him any rights to remain in the doorway. Indeed, it could be argued that the shopkeeper was consenting to the homeless person sleeping in the doorway if he gave consent to registration. The shopkeeper would be placed in a worse position in that case.

Homeless people have enough problems with being homeless and registering to vote without the Conservative party trying to restrict their ability to vote. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) described the prospect of the homeless voting as a nightmare. I suspect that one of the worst nightmares of the homeless would be for him to be in government again. The Conservative party simply does not want the homeless to vote. That is what the Conservatives are frightened of and what the amendments are about. They are seeking to deny electors the right to express a view on their policies.

The Conservatives are frightened of the electorate. They were defeated at the general election and they do not want more people to vote because they, too, would vote against the Conservative party. The amendments would deny homeless people the right to vote. They would undermine the ability of people who should be able to exercise their democratic rights to do so.

It being Ten o'clock, further consideration of the Bill stood adjourned.

Business of the House

10 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): With permission, I should like to make a short business statement.

In view of the lack of progress on the Bill tonight, I regret that the first business tomorrow will be the Representation of the People Bill (Allocation of Time) motion, followed by conclusion of the remaining stages of that Bill. The business for the remainder of that day will be a debate on the Braithwaite report on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I greatly regret the business statement by the Leader of the House. The Bill that was before us this evening concerns the representation of the people. It is the Government's answer to falling turnouts at local elections and general elections and the dismal turnout at the European elections of just over 23 per cent. Tonight's announcement is a slap in the face for our democratic system and will do nothing to promote representative democracy.

The Representation of the People Bill has enormous repercussions for the way in which we will vote in this country. It gives the Home Secretary enormous powers—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman. There must be quiet in the House, so that everyone can hear what he is saying.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Bill has enormous repercussions for the way in which we will vote in this country. It gives the Home Secretary enormous powers to alter the hours of the vote, the number of days of the ballot, where ballot boxes will be placed and who is able to vote. It is ironic that that is the Bill that is being treated so badly by the Government.

Guillotining that vital constitutional legislation will damage the very fabric of our parliamentary democracy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not anticipate the debate that has been announced for tomorrow. This is a business statement and I hope that all questions to the Leader of the House will be relatively brief.

Mr. Evans: Full debate on and scrutiny of the remaining stages of the Bill is vital. The lack of it will ensure a poorer Bill. We have accused the Government of having no regard for this country's constitution, and nothing proves it more than their actions this evening. I ask the Leader of the House to reconsider the decision and to allow full debate on the remaining stages of the Bill.

Mrs. Beckett: I concur with the hon. Gentleman's remarks in so far as I accept that it is an important Bill. That is why the Government have taken it on the Floor of the House and why we have been prepared to be open in

discussion about the handling of it. Indeed, we were asked for a day to deal with the items that were before the House today, and that time was provided.

It is my understanding that the time has been taken to debate the use of such words as "temporary" or the phrase "for example". The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the Bill raises important issues. I am sure that he is as aware as I am that the House can work only with a degree of consent. When it appears that a small handful of hon. Members exploit that consent, the House has to take that into account and to change the ground rules.

On Thursday, I made the business statement and announced the time allocated for the Bill. Not one single Conservative Member—the hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day), who is speaking from a sedentary position, was not even here—raised the issue of the Bill, said that there was any problem, or that the time was in any way inadequate. It is too late to do so now.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Thirteen batches of amendments have been tabled on Report. So far today, we have not even completed the first three because of the activity on the Opposition Benches. The last three groups of amendments on the amendment paper stand in my name. If they had been discussed, there is no reason why the Minister and I could not have dealt with them in 20 minutes or so. In drawing up the timetable motion, I hope that consideration will be given to dealing with serious matters towards the end of the Bill that might otherwise be neglected.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's point, and I have great sympathy with him. He has a long track record of activity on and expertise and serious interest in these matters. He will appreciate that it is not easy to reflect what he seeks, but I will certainly bear his remarks in mind.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Is it not the case that the business statement has been made as a consequence of the insufferable attempts at filibustering by certain right hon. and hon. Members? Is it not also the case that their motive has been not an interest in the Representation of the People Bill, but a desire to talk out the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill? When the Leader of the House makes her statement tomorrow, can she guarantee a slot for the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill so that it receives proper scrutiny by the House and is not subject to further delay?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman is entirely correct. It is particularly unfortunate that some of those who have been discussing at great length quite minor issues in the Bill—considering that it contains some serious issues that they could have been discussing—said that their opposition to the original fur farming legislation was because it was a private Member's Bill when it should have been a Government Bill. Now it is a Government Bill, and although I cannot undertake to give the hon. Gentleman full details tomorrow, I can confirm that it will be a Government Act and that it will go on the statute book.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that what has happened today has been an absolute disgrace and makes a mockery of Parliament? Is she further aware that her statement is quite justified, and that there can be no other way of proceeding with this measure?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He makes the point that when a few abuse the freedoms and privileges rightly enjoyed by this House, they bring them into jeopardy.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Leader of the House tell us what she is afraid of? Why can the House not continue its proper debate on the Bill, making steady progress as it has been doing this evening? Why has the right hon. Lady come here in a fit of pique, wearing her jackboots? Will she acknowledge that her colleagues are not prepared to continue considering the Bill any time after 10 o'clock, a time that seems to have some magic significance for her? Why can we not simply get on with our business and consider the Bill? What objection does the Leader of the House have to continuing consideration of the Bill in the perfectly orderly way in which it has been conducted so far?

Mrs. Beckett: Many of the issues that I understand the right hon. Gentleman has been discussing this evening could have been raised on either of the first two days that the Bill was debated on the Floor of the House. However, he took no part in those debates. I am sorry to disappoint him but I am not afraid of anything except an abuse of the freedoms of the many in this House by the exploitation of a few.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Will the Leader of the House explain what on earth is the point of inviting Conservative Members to participate in the working party on whose work the Representation of the People Bill was built, when other Conservative Members abuse Parliament on Report?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is extremely difficult. We recognise that hon. Members of all parties play a serious part in the business of the House and address the issues that we are sent here to address. However, from time to time there are those who frivolously exploit their opportunities, but there we go.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Is not this another intolerant act from an increasingly intolerant Government? *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Lady was not in the Chamber for one minute of today's debates. Had she been here, she would have heard her hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) support points made by the Opposition. Will she tell us what the Report stage is about, if we are not allowed a further four hours—at the present rate of progress—to complete the Bill in an ordered and serious manner? If the right hon. Lady had bothered to be in the Chamber during part of the Report stage, she would not have had to rely on second and third-hand accounts of what she thought was being debated.

Mrs. Beckett: Like other hon. Members, I am able to take advantage of modern communications in the House, so I know what is happening. I should take the right hon. Gentleman's representations more seriously, first, if they were not a characteristic feature of his behaviour and,

[Mrs. Beckett]

secondly, if he had contributed to the proceedings on the Bill during either of the first two full days of debate on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): Will my right hon. Friend consider the representations on the whole process of timetabling that I made to her and the Chief Whip? Does not tonight's ridiculous charade underline the arguments in favour of timetabling all business?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is entirely correct in that—as my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) pointed out and as, I am sure, Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen recognise—there are undoubtedly useful issues in the Bill which should be debated. The time made available for debate was not challenged until this evening; that time has been used not to discuss serious issues but to filibuster. That is an abuse of the House.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I am sorry that the right hon. Lady has not yet told the House what her intentions are with regard to the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] That Bill raises matters of considerable importance, which touch on the liberty of the subject. I want the Bill to be properly debated, at the proper time, so that I can speak and vote against it. It was never a good idea to put a Bill of such importance on late at night. I hope that when she decides on when we shall debate that Bill, we shall do so early in the day and with sufficient time.

Mrs. Beckett: I assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we have every intention of giving time for that matter to be debated and voted on. I note that this is the first admission from the Opposition that the need to debate the Representation of the People Bill has to do with the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill—the right hon. and learned Gentleman has just made my point.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): Will my right hon. Friend tell the House and the hard-pressed fishing communities of Scarborough and Whitby what will happen to the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill? Is not the lack of seriousness with which the Opposition take such issues an indictment of the Opposition? When can we return to that important business which is vital to my constituents?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is correct. What is more, I suspect that he is probably speaking for some Opposition Members, although for reasons that we all understand, they are showing a certain amount of collegiate loyalty. Although, last Thursday, I was not pressed to find more time for the Bill that was debated this evening, I was pressed to find an opportunity to discuss fishing issues. My hon. Friend will know that one of the Bills that has been lost for today's business, as a result of the activities of Opposition Members, would have offered an opportunity to discuss fishing issues.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): When the Labour Members who are shouting and bawling—almost none of them bothered to attend today's debates—*[Interruption.]* When they read *Hansard* tomorrow morning, they will discover that, since 5 o'clock, we have held a constructive, good-humoured and well-ordered debate. Will the Leader of the House tell us why she has not bothered to come into the Chamber to see what has been going on? Will she tell the House why she is so terrified of debate, and of scrutiny by Opposition Members?

Mrs. Beckett: I am shaking in my shoes, naturally, as a result of that condemnation. I will simply say to the hon. Gentleman that, so far as I can see, he too is one of those who did not contribute to debates on any stage of the Bill until today. Of course it is perfectly legitimate for him to do so, but I simply say to him that his concern is perhaps a little late found.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): As the promoter of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill in the last Session, I assure my right hon. Friend that the Conservative Members—two of them in particular—who have been filibustering this afternoon have form in that respect. What does she think that the Conservative party has to say about animal welfare to all those groups who oppose cruelty? The vast majority of Members want fur farming banned. Can she assure us that she will bring the Bill back for its Second Reading as soon as possible?

Mrs. Beckett: Again, let me assure my hon. Friend that the Government have every intention of ensuring that the Bill whose original purpose she promoted reaches the statute book. As she will fully understand, I cannot at this second give her details of when and how that Bill will again be debated, but I can assure her that what has happened in the past has been what many Members across the House regard as an exploitation of the use of private Members' time, and we do not intend to see the same thing happen in Government time.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I have not been taking part in these proceedings. Instead, I have been making profitable use of my time in the Library, preparing for the sitting of Standing Committee F tomorrow morning. What makes the right hon. Lady so reluctant to move the 10 o'clock motion, and what is it about Labour Members that they are unable to make use of their time at night when they are not taking part in the proceedings in the Chamber?

Mrs. Beckett: I know that the hon. Gentleman is an assiduous attender at our debates. I am confident that, in his heart of hearts, he is well aware that to spend time in the House discussing the use of the words "temporary" and "verifiable" may not be the best use of the time that is available to us.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I was referred to earlier. Yes, I participated in some of the earlier debate, but it took me merely six minutes to make two very simple points. It took Conservative Members 60 minutes to make the same points, very badly.

Mrs. Beckett: That is why my hon. Friend is so much more highly paid.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): My track record on animal welfare is reasonably well known in the House.

I am a passionate supporter of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill and I have waited patiently here tonight, with a view to coming into the Chamber to support it. However, as one who, wearing another hat, has on occasions had the duty to defend the rights of Back Benchers, I would not wish that Bill to be used to deny Back Benchers on both sides of the House the right to discuss issues on Report. I have yet to hear the right hon. Lady answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth): why will she not move the 10 o'clock motion, so that we may complete the discussions on the Representation of the People Bill and move on to the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman has no more control over his hon. Friends than has anyone else, and there can be no assurance that we would complete the stages of the Representation of the People Bill if we moved the 10 o'clock motion and sat through the following day. He may be prepared to take the risk; I prefer to give him the proper time to debate the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill in reasonable hours and at whatever length is required.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): Is it not clear that the filibuster by the Conservatives is not just an abuse of the democratic procedures of the House but a denial of the democratic wishes of the people of this country to prohibit the outlandish practice of fur farming? Will my right hon. Friend now take it upon herself to introduce timetabling of parliamentary business so that a minority of Conservative extremists cannot obstruct the democratic will of the people?

Mrs. Beckett: As the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) knows, I have always been reluctant to contemplate the use of the procedure that I have had to announce tonight. I am a strong believer in, and have always practised, the use of sensible programming so that issues of real importance on Bills may be debated and we do not spend time on issues of no real importance or of minor importance.

I wholly accept my hon. Friend's point that the programming of legislation is likely to lead to sensible and proper discussion.

Mr. Gale: Who is the judge of that?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman shouts, "Who is the judge of that?" Any Conservative Member who thought that inadequate time had been proposed for the Representation of the People Bill had the opportunity to say so at business questions. Not one of them opened their mouth.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Can the right hon. Lady cite a precedent in the public business of the House in which two Second Reading debates were taken in succession on the same day and following the Report stage of a third Bill?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman should have more sense. If he had been here longer, he would have known that the previous Government did everything.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Does my right hon. Friend agree that many of our constituents would have been appalled to see what has gone on in the House tonight, especially the attempt to prevent us discussing the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill, which many of them want to see passed? Will she ensure that the right of Back Benchers to have such discussions is fully protected and not overridden by the juvenile behaviour of certain Conservative Members?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. There is an important balance to be struck in preserving the rights of Back Benchers on both sides of the House. We are in danger of straying into territory in which the freedoms that are properly, sensibly and rightly available to Members are used to create problems that will ultimately be resolved. Every Government have had to make such decisions from time to time. If we face continual tactics of the kind that we saw in the discussions of the Representation of the People Bill, such matters will have to be considered.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): As an assiduous attender of debates in the Chamber, may I assure the right hon. Lady that Conservative Members simply sought to amend ill-considered, confused and sometimes downright stupid features of the Representation of the People Bill? Her statement, which attempts to prevent us from continuing to do that, is an abrogation of the democratic rights of the House.

Will the right hon. Lady also note that the hon. Members for Corby (Mr. Hope), for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) all had one characteristic in common when they pronounced judgment on Conservative Members? None of them was in the Chamber for the debates this afternoon or this evening.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman should bear in mind—I notice it continually—that, although Members may not be present in the Chamber, they observe our debates.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On television.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman says, "On television" as though there were something shocking about that. Nevertheless, those Members hear our debates. It is not valid to assume that Members who have not been present in the Chamber are not aware of the debates.

I recognise that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is an assiduous attender in the Chamber and takes part assiduously in our business. On the whole—I do not wish to do him any harm—he is not among those who are most guilty of sometimes using our procedures in the way to which I have had to draw attention tonight. Although it may not suit Conservative Members to admit it, he will be as well aware as anyone else that it is important to strike a balance. On the one hand, we should preserve the proper freedoms of Members and, on the other, we should deal properly with the business—Government or otherwise—that is before us. If that balance goes adrift, it has somehow to be remedied.

Mr. Hope: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), in his

[Mr. Hope]

assiduousness in observing the Chamber's proceedings, has clearly failed to recognise that I was here earlier today—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must sit down if I rise to my feet—*[Interruption.]* He must not try to continue the debate from a sedentary position, otherwise he will get into real trouble. He raises a point for debate, which he will have other opportunities to raise if he wishes. It was not a point of order for the Chair. We have heard quite sufficient on the matter tonight; there will be a debate tomorrow.

Mr. Wilshire: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. During the questions to the Leader of the House on her statement, a Labour Member used the word "filibuster" to describe contributions that you and other Deputy Speakers have clearly ruled are perfectly proper and in order. Is it in order to use the word "filibuster" in those circumstances?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Great emotion normally arises when timetable motions are introduced. The proceedings have been chaired throughout the evening in such a way that we have noticed when an hon. Member has been out of order, and that has been dealt with. For the most part, as we know, proceedings in the House move slowly; at other times, they move amazingly quickly. Generally speaking, everything has been in order this evening.

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Jane Kennedy be discharged from the Administration Committee and Mr. Mike Hall be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

NHS (Avon)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), I ask those right hon. and hon. Members who are not staying for the Adjournment debate to depart quickly and quietly.

10.26 pm

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise in the House tonight the situation in the national health service in the Avon area, which is of grave concern to myself and my constituents. The matter is of particular note at the moment because of winter pressures.

May I say at the outset that I want to place on public record my appreciation and tribute to the NHS staff in the Avon area, who have performed remarkable feats in recent weeks. There can be no doubt that it is their dedication, devotion and hard work, which is well beyond the call of duty, that has enabled the health service in my area to keep going under extraordinary pressures.

The chairman of the North Bristol NHS trust, which serves my constituents, said in a letter to all hon. Members in the Avon area:

"Our nurses and physicians are working more than flat out and our surgeons are assisting them."

Clearly, the staff in the NHS deserve our warmest thanks and appreciation, which all too often they do not receive.

It is because of the appreciation of the work that NHS staff are doing that it is particularly important that they are not taken advantage of. My concern is that the NHS is relying too much on the good will and hard work of its staff, and it may even be taking advantage of their good will. In many respects, the NHS is close to breaking point, not only this winter but at other times, and it is only the staff's dedication that prevents things from going seriously wrong.

I want to set out the background to what has been happening in Avon, to look back at events of recent weeks and to consider whether those might have been prevented or dealt with better. I want also to consider the health authority's future and the pressures that it faces. I am grateful to the health authority, to North Bristol NHS trust and to the chairman of my local primary care group for briefing me in advance of this debate.

We have been through a remarkable few weeks. In the two weeks after Christmas, emergency admissions in the Avon area were 14 per cent. above the levels in the preceding autumn, which were themselves relatively high. That is an average over the whole authority. In the North Bristol NHS trust, which serves my constituency, there were

"some days when emergency admissions increased by 40 per cent."

Those are extraordinary pressures for the health service to bear.

How did the service cope? As far as we can tell, it coped remarkably well in the circumstances. The briefings from the health authority and the trust suggest that the planning for the general run of winter pressures, coupled with the good will and endeavours of the staff, meant that many of the worst possible outcomes did not materialise.

Having said that, things were extremely difficult—in my view, unacceptably so. To humanise the problem, I quote not the health authority statistics—valid though they are—but the letter dated 12 January from the chairman of the North Bristol NHS trust to Members of Parliament. She writes that the pressure began on 3 January,

"when people, suffering from the complications of flu, started to pour in . . . We have no doubt that the people who are being admitted need to be in hospital—they are very ill."

There is no question that the admissions were not necessary. She says that on 7 January, the pressures were "particularly bad".

"In Frenchay Hospital"—

which is in my constituency—

"we even had to turn our day surgery units into holding bays for the medical patients we were admitting and cancel all day cases."

By midday that day, out of the 654 beds in the hospital, only one was available. It had to be kept available because, by that point, Frenchay was acting as a receiving centre for neurosurgery, not just for Greater Bristol or for Avon, but for the whole of the south of England and the whole of Wales. Perhaps we should be having debates about the circumstances in which health services everywhere but Avon found themselves, given that our local hospitals were under such pressure, having to serve such a huge area. I am greatly concerned about the time it would have taken for someone from the far south of England or a remote part of Wales to reach Frenchay.

The chairman goes on, making a critical point:

"At this point we did something which we never had to do before. We made an arrangement with United Bristol Healthcare Trust and Royal United Hospital NHS Trust."

They agreed that each hospital would, in turn, for a three-hour period, take in all further admissions in the area, except for "blue light" cases or those who turned up at casualty. That gave each hospital six hours to catch its breath and get things under control.

It shows the strain under which the health service was operating that, for six hours, Frenchay and other hospitals were effectively closed. It worries me that the trusts are running so close to capacity. Even though I acknowledge that there was a seasonal peak in demand—I do not want to argue about whether it was an epidemic—it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that such an event would occur. Hospitals had to close because we run the health service so close to capacity. I am worried that we reached the point where, despite the best efforts of staff, there was only one neurosurgical bed in the whole of southern England and Wales, and hospitals were effectively closed for six hours.

At this point, I should like to put in a plug for my local cottage hospital in Thornbury. The chairman of my local primary care group has pointed out that, without Thornbury hospital, there would have been

"significant extra pressure on Southmead/Frenchay."

Thornbury has 24 beds, but only one of them was free and there was rapid turnover during the Christmas and new year period. Cottage hospitals have recently come under threat; I urge the Government, when considering their future, to bear in mind the important role that they play, especially at busy times.

Could those events have been foreseen or prevented? Management plans were in place, but was there enough preventive work? Was there a sufficiently energetic inoculation programme in the autumn? My impression is that there was some effort, but not enough. Will more effort be made next year, or will we run the risk of the same thing happening again? Is the NHS running too close to capacity? My feeling is that the financial pressures being put on the health service mean that it is, with the result that when circumstances such as a severe flu outbreak arise, its facilities are stretched close to breaking point.

We must look forward and ask what will be the legacy of those winter pressures during the coming weeks and months. It is obvious that there will be pressure on waiting lists. The letter from the chairman of the North Bristol NHS trust states:

"I know you will appreciate that, with this pressure on our services, we are not able to keep up with the planned reduction of our waiting list. We are now falling back by about 40 operations a day. If and when the emergency demands reduce, we will do our best to catch up . . . but our staff will be very tired and we must not push them beyond the limits of safety."

Over the Christmas and millennium eve period, many staff put in extra time that they would not normally have put in, and they expected a new year break in return. That has not materialised and it is not clear how the waiting list backlog can be cleared without substantial support from central Government.

The trusts face two substantial pressures, the first of which is the additional costs that they have incurred in dealing with flu and the winter crisis. Will the Government meet these costs or will the money have to be found from the trusts' budgets? The money was not budgeted for, so will that mean cuts in other NHS services?

The chairman's letter from which I have been quoting concludes:

"My Board has spelt out clear priorities for the Trust; firstly, to treat emergencies; secondly, to meet the in-patient waiting list targets and thirdly to meet financial targets."

In my view, that is the right sequence—patients first and money second. However, in the modern NHS the trusts are businesses. If the Government do not help them with the additional financial pressure that they face as a result of the winter crisis, how will they cope? How will they reduce waiting lists? How will they improve NHS services and not merely stand still?

The second funding pressure that I fear they will face is from the pay award announced this week. I understand—I hope that the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—that the money that has been promised to nurses and others, which is entirely welcome, must be found within existing NHS planned and present budgets. In other words, there is no new money to match the new pay award. If the trusts are finding money to cope with the winter pressures that they did not have in the budget and if next year they have to find money for salaries that was not in the budget, what will be cut? If the Government will not meet these shortfalls, what will the trusts have to cut?

I shall look ahead and set out what might happen if the winter pressures, and the financial pressures that have followed from them, are not dealt with. I received an e-mail from a constituent—to preserve her confidentiality, I shall call her Mrs. A—who e-mailed me within minutes of seeing the news about the lady from the north of England who had cancer treatment repeatedly postponed.

[Mr. Steve Webb]

The story has appeared in the media. Mrs. A tells a heart-rending tale of the state of the NHS and of the problems that will not be dealt with if the trusts do not have the necessary money. She states:

"We are prompted to write after hearing about the cancer patient . . . My husband has been fighting cancer for 17 months now and has first hand experience of the desperation waiting lists can cause. He had to wait six weeks for radiotherapy that his consultant really wanted him to have immediately after an intense course of chemotherapy. He has since been told he is terminally ill and we can't help but wonder what difference that waiting time would have. We are disgusted that the national health service has been allowed to be grossly underfunded when, as we have learnt, health is all that matters and that without your health you have nothing. We beg of you to hound government ministers responsible to stop looking at short term voting gains and put the income tax up and the money where it is needed."

The final line of her e-mail reads:

"By the way, my husband is . . . 32 years old and will leave three children fatherless."

I naturally responded promptly to that communication, and I received a further message from Mrs. A, which re-emphasised the pain that she has felt and her distress about the health service. I shall read part of her message to me. She states:

"On the day my husband was asked if he wanted to give one last, new treatment a go (or else have six months to live) the nurses on the ward were using up 'favours' between the departments to get him a C.T. scan. They could only wrangle an X-ray!! This obviously is just a split moment in our lives that caused desperation on top of desperation. The nurses, no wonder, probably feel such desperation daily, again because of what boils down to lack of funds. What would a penny on Tax be to everyone and how many lives and families could that keep going?"

When Liberal Democrat Members say that more should be spent on the NHS, we are sometimes asked where it should come from. I make no apology for the fact that I have called for extra spending on the NHS. I have called for the trusts to be reimbursed for the costs of the winter pressures, which were unforeseen. I have also called for the Government to meet the costs of the pay rise that were not budgeted for. Above all, when situations arise that affect people such as Mrs. A and her husband, I cannot believe that the NHS is properly funded all year round, let alone during the winter.

The Government have a chance to do more than what the Prime Minister promised, which was to reach an acceptable funding level in five years' time. They could start this April. They could go beyond their published spending plans and not cut the standard rate of income tax by 1p in the pound. That would raise well over £2 billion, which our health service needs now. The Government seem to be saying that it will take years to find the necessary money, yet they are handing over £2 billion to taxpayers who, all the evidence suggests, want that money to be spent on the health service that they and we treasure.

I had the permission of my constituent to read that extract in the House tonight, because she contacted me in desperation about the state of the health service. People who work in the health service have shown yet again this winter their dedication, skill and devotion. Advantage must not be taken of them. When the Government have money to spend on the health service, they should spend it on the health service, not on tax cuts. I hope that the Minister will go to the Treasury tomorrow and relay that message to the Chancellor in the strongest possible terms.

10.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on his success in securing this debate on winter pressures on the NHS in Avon. I am grateful to him for choosing that subject, because it provides me, as it provided him, with an opportunity to acknowledge the extraordinary success of the Avon health community and all its staff in coping with pressures which were undeniably extreme. There were greatly increased demands on health services. I believe that the hon. Gentleman will agree that Avon has shown by its planning and dedication that when we attempt to meet unprecedented demands, it can be done. It was done in Avon.

We must pay tribute to the staff, who have shown themselves to be extremely flexible, who were recalled and sacrificed their Christmas holidays and the millennium period. Despite the exceptional demands, those who needed care received it in Avon. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that.

We must acknowledge the contribution of managers and clinicians, as well as that of the nursing staff and ancillary staff, who are often forgotten. They have all played their part in those efforts.

That the NHS in Avon was under intense pressure is undeniable. In December the Avon ambulance service trust dealt with 14 per cent. more emergency responses than in the previous year, and so far this month the number of ambulance activations is 28 per cent. higher than in January last year.

Overall, on average, 254 people were admitted to hospitals per day as emergencies during the period from 27 December to 9 January, compared with 222 emergency admissions per day during the previous period. United Bristol Healthcare NHS trust admitted 726 emergencies between 26 December and 12 January, with the number of medical emergencies—an important point—showing a rise of 36 per cent. over the same period last year.

At the hon. Gentleman's local North Bristol NHS trust, too, the number of emergency admissions rose. He cited the figures. On a number of occasions the extra demand led to isolated problems, with a number of long trolley waits before admittance at United Bristol Healthcare NHS trust.

I acknowledge that the individual cases raised by the hon. Gentleman show that the service was under pressure. I appreciate the distress caused for the patients and families concerned. I in no way underestimate that distress, but it does not show that the NHS in Avon was unable to meet the demands imposed on it by the extended Christmas and millennium holidays or the influenza outbreak.

There is certainly much in the media about the pressure on critical care services—that is, intensive and high-dependency care. Although there was great pressure on those services, all Avon patients who needed intensive care received it locally. That was achieved by the

carefully planned use of theatre recovery areas and by extending high-dependency care on to general wards to enable patients to leave intensive care units.

The increase in capacity to deal with peaks in demand was provided by asking regular staff to work extra hours, as well as by using bank and agency staff. Far from being in crisis locally, the intensive care arrangements in Avon were such that the health community was able to provide assistance to other areas, as the hon. Gentleman acknowledged. It was able to take a number of patients requiring intensive care, as well as dealing with patients transferred into the area for specialist and tertiary interventions requiring intensive care afterwards.

It is further to the credit of staff, as we should acknowledge, that the NHS in Avon coped with the demand without the additional help of NHS Direct, which is available to over 60 per cent. of the population in England. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows that NHS Direct will be available in Avon by October this year.

I want to comment on planning, because I do not want us to believe that the system coped by accident: it coped through careful planning, which began with establishing local winter planning groups. They first met in April last year to co-ordinate health and social care services over the winter and the millennium holiday. It is important to acknowledge that, for the first time, we have pulled together health authorities, social services, NHS trusts, primary care groups, out-of-hours and deputising services, police and fire services, the voluntary and private sectors, community health councils and local authority departments. The complicated organisation of Avon health authority, which comprises 10 NHS trusts, 12 primary care groups and four unitary local authorities led to four local plans, based on the four local authority boundaries.

We must acknowledge that Avon health authority represents a tremendous success story. Its plans were assessed by the south-west regional office of the NHS executive and social care regional staff who considered them comprehensive and robust. The millennium executive team visited the local winter planning group in October. It identified some points that required further work, but it generally agreed with the regional office's assessment of the plans

The planning has built on the record extra resources that the Government made available to the NHS. I shall explain that in more detail. Unlike previous years, when money was provided late in the day, in 1999 planning started early, and the resources for contingency arrangements were made available early. In the comprehensive spending review in July 1998, we made additional resources available to the NHS. We made a three-year commitment, which allows for planning. Overall, it was the biggest injection of cash in the history of the NHS.

Avon health authority received £582.5 million, which represents a cash increase of £36.5 million, or 6.69 per cent. Next year, Avon will receive £629.4 million, a cash increase of £40.7 million. At 6.9 per cent., that represents the highest growth in the south-west region.

Mr. Webb: When I spoke to the chair of my primary health group this week, he said that while the Government talk about growth money, it is eaten up by, for example, salaries or the flu bug, and that services cannot be developed because people are running to stand still. The Minister may talk of "growth money" and "record figures"—after two years of near freeze or sticking to Tory plans—but is it not true to say that, on the ground, the NHS cannot expand?

Ms Stuart: Not quite. The extra money is being provided, but in a targeted manner. Some extra money was for local planning. I shall discuss the implementation of such planning shortly. However, I want to highlight the fact that we are considering not simply extra money but modernising the service, changing some of the practices and the ways in which we use beds and deal with admissions. Avon has been excellent at finding innovative ways of doing that.

Last year's total included £4.92 million from the modernisation fund, specifically targeted at waiting lists. I know that the hon. Gentleman is worried about waiting lists and that he secured an earlier Adjournment debate on the subject. Of the additional £5.58 million that the health authority received, funding was targeted at, for example, staff recruitment and retention—again, that paid off—mental health, cancer waiting times and nurse prescribing.

However, we must not neglect the fabric of the NHS. As part of the largest capital programme in the history of the NHS, it is forecast that the total capital spend in Avon will be more than £38.5 million. That includes £2.6 million from the modernisation fund to improve the accident and emergency departments in all the major acute trusts in Avon. Avon health authority and the local trusts will have allowed for the extra spending needed to cope with the expected additional pressures when planning for winter. Making financial arrangements was part of the winter planning.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the increases awarded to nurses. Again, significant account was taken of them in the extra health allocations, which were announced recently. Although all NHS organisations in the Avon area took steps to increase their capacity to deal with winter pressures, I want to highlight the particular measures taken by the South Gloucestershire planning group, as they will be of the most concern to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. North Bristol NHS trust staffed and opened an additional 44 beds and had a further 14 on standby. Those measures included opening 18 medical beds in Elgar House at Southmead. At Frenchay hospital, the trust opened an additional ward with 17 beds to serve as an overflow facility as well as a further four medical beds on existing wards and six low-dependency beds at Blackberry Hill hospital. In addition, the trust has opened a further 62 beds this month to cope with the record number of emergency admissions.

The trust has continued its expansion of the "hospital at home" scheme and placed particular emphasis on early intervention. That has increased the scheme's capacity to take referrals from general practitioners and hospitals, reducing the need for—or cutting down the length of—hospital admissions. The health authority also made a separate non-recurring allocation of £100,000 to North Bristol NHS trust to help with winter pressures. That money has been used to provide occupational therapy, physiotherapy and home-loan equipment and to meet the extra costs of ambulance transport to assist with prompt discharge from hospitals.

[Ms Stuart]

The local primary care group was closely involved in planning for the winter. It put in place a number of initiatives including extra surgeries without appointments, nurse-run dressing clinics, newsletter information to patients, extra contraception clinics and influenza and pneumococcal vaccination clinics. It also planned for emergency provisions in the case of widespread utilities and systems failures. Thankfully, the last measure was not needed, but although the system failures predicted for 2000 have not happened, those plans were extremely valuable and that should be recognised.

The hon. Gentleman raised concerns about elective surgery. It is part of normal NHS planning on dealing with waiting lists to take account of the expected close-down over the holiday period and reductions in activity caused by winter pressures. We always expected less elective activity to take place during January. North Bristol NHS trust, to deal with some of the extra pressures, entered an agreement with St. Mary's hospital—a local charitable organisation—to carry out routine surgery there. The doctors carrying out that surgery will be NHS staff working in NHS time. The trust is consulting patients about whether they wish to be treated at St. Mary's. Those arrangements will mean treatment for more than 200 patients, and it must be emphasised that the use of private facilities will not lead to any charges to any patient.

Mr. Webb: I raised the case of my constituent, Mrs. A, who would want the Minister to respond to her tragic circumstances. I hope that she will be able to do so.

Ms Stuart: When a particular case is raised it is only right that I mount a proper investigation and I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman contacted me after the debate. I shall investigate the circumstances. This is a serious case and he deserves a serious answer.

It is important to say that, although the success of such planning has been shown in Avon, the future of the NHS is extra funding, which the Government are providing. By modernising our services, we can build on the structures that we have and build capacity. I could go to the Treasury tomorrow to ask for extra money, but that would produce not one extra nurse or one extra doctor. The capacity building that we are undertaking with capital investment and training programmes, combined with an examination of the way in which we deliver services, means that we shall improve the way that we cope with winter pressures. Avon coped with unprecedented demands, and coped well. I want to acknowledge that tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 20 January 2000

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Class Sizes

1. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on the cost of his plans to reduce class sizes for five, six and seven–year–olds. [103675]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): We are providing a total of £620 million to deliver the infant class size pledge, £200 million of which is for capital, which will provide an extra 2,000 classrooms. We are providing an extra 6,000 teachers, and we will achieve the class size pledge early.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Is it not a fact that the Government originally estimated the cost of fulfilling that pledge at £100 million? Whatever the value of the pledge, is it not grossly incompetent of the Department for Education and Employment to spend six times the original estimate? Does the Secretary of State recognise that, if his Department had worked in partnership with independent schools to offer first-year schools provision, the pledge could have been delivered at a fraction of the cost? Does not that failure to work with the private sector show a lack of imagination on the part of the Minister and his colleagues? Will he welcome the intention of Surrey county council's local education authority to explore the use of independent schools, so that the pledge can be delivered with value for money while building bridges between different education providers in the local community?

Mr. Blunkett: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, he appears to be mixing different Conservative policies, and not addressing the issue of class size. There is no suggestion that class sizes could be reduced by using the private sector. No one has said that the class size pledge, which has reduced the number of children in classes of more than 30 from 500,000 to 180,000, and which will reduce the number to nil within 18 months, could be achieved by buying places in infant classes in private schools that do not exist.

Mr. St. Aubyn: They do.

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman may say so, but we are spending money on 6,000 additional teachers to make a reduction in classes possible. We are spending on capital to ensure expansion so that more people may have choice. We are keeping the pledge early, by spending at least £300 million of the money that would have gone into the assisted places scheme by 2002. All that will ensure a decent education for every child in every community, not just children for whom a private school happens to be available.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): I welcome the figures that my right hon. Friend has announced. It is rich to hear the Conservative party, which did not want to do anything about class sizes, moaning that we are spending too much money on reducing them. Will my right hon. Friend learn from the fact that money for the pledge has been ring-fenced? Will he ensure that all money passed from the Department for Education and Employment is passed on to schools? Will he ensure that much more funding is ring-fenced in future, so that local authorities such as Leicestershire cannot withhold money that the Government have given them for schools?

Mr. Blunkett: I am always willing to learn from successful policies. I encourage all hon. Members to ensure that resources allocated for education are spent as intended, and that is why I have written to the leaders of every council and education authority. I want all Conservative, Liberal Democrats and Labour councils to fulfil commitments to the electorate to spend that money on education, not highways, repairs or spurious projects. It should be spent on ensuring that every child has a high-quality education. We shall monitor what happens over the next few weeks, learn lessons from that and take the appropriate steps.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): While the Government are spending £620 million on keeping their pledge, secondary class sizes are rising. How much would it have cost to keep secondary classes at the sizes inherited by the Secretary of State? Will he confirm that, in order to maintain spending on education as a proportion of national income at the average achieved by the Conservative Government, the Government would have had to inject through the comprehensive spending review not £19 billion, but £32 billion?

Mr. Blunkett: Average class size in both primary and secondary sectors fell from 24.9 in January 1998 to 24.8 in January 1999. We shall soon have the figures for the past 12 months. At the same time, the pupil-teacher ratio across the whole sector fell from 18.9 to 18.8 to one. By the end of the spending review, we shall have spent £200 extra on every primary school child, compared with a drop of £30 during the final three years of the previous Government.

At the end of the previous Parliament, gross domestic product had fallen as a proportion of national income by 0.3 per cent. By the end of the current Parliament, it will have risen by 0.2 per cent.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): Is my right hon. Friend aware that an extra £500,000 has been put into schools in Rotherham this year to fund 18 additional key stage 1 teachers and help to slash the number of five, six and seven-year-olds in large classes? Does he recognise, however, that some schools prefer not to have mixed age groups, and that that can make it harder to reduce all class sizes to below 30? Will he reassure such schools that their approach will be respected as the Government move to keep the class size pledge in full?

Mr. Blunkett: Yes, I can give that assurance.

Higher Education (Cornwall)

2. **Mr. Andrew George** (St. Ives): What assessment he has made of the higher education needs of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. [103676]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): That kind of assessment is one for the interested bodies in the region to make. We welcome the work being done by the combined universities in Cornwall partnership. In Cornwall, as elsewhere, higher education is critical to economic and social development. We recognise the strong demand for higher education in Cornwall, as shown by the 7 per cent. increase, between 1998 and 1999, of students from Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly who are studying at UK higher education institutions.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the Minister for that helpful reply. However, Cornwall lacks the core university facilities that many other parts of the country take for granted. What security can Cornwall achieve in its plans to establish such core facilities? To do so, some assurance as to student numbers is required in the medium term.

Mr. Wicks: Many parts of the country do not have their own university as such. However, as I pointed out, the work being carried out in Cornwall by Exeter university, Plymouth university and Falmouth college of arts is encouraging. I know that the Higher Education Funding Council wants an increase in higher education opportunities in Cornwall, as do we.

Specialist Schools

3. **Barbara Follett** (Stevenage): How many specialist schools will be established within the next two years. [103677]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the names of 36 schools that will be designated specialist schools. That brings the total to 480. Current plans mean that there will be 600 specialist schools by September 2001, and 800 by 2003.

Barbara Follett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does she agree that that expansion shows the Government's commitment to modernising the comprehensive system? Will she do all that she can to encourage more schools, especially in the eastern region, to apply for that status?

Ms Morris: I agree with my hon. Friend. There has long been a myth about the monolith of sameness in comprehensive schools. The specialist schools programme clearly shows that comprehensive schools do have strengths. They should be allowed to develop and build on those strengths. We should expect them to share their expertise with other schools, as happens under the specialist school programme.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will be pleased that, today, we have announced that there will be two further specialist schools in her county—although they are not in Stevenage. I hope that further applications will be made from other areas, including Stevenage, and that there will be designations at a future date.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister agree that one of the advantages of schools being encouraged to develop specialisms is that teachers and governors can be motivated to develop those schools further? Does she realise that there is a particular interest in developing specialisms in languages, in science and technology and in sport? Will she join me in congratulating France Hill school in my constituency? The school was known for its specialism in sport but, under the inspired leadership of Mrs. Jacqui Pearson, the head teacher, it has gone from strength to strength. The school has recently been given a most successful Ofsted report, and will tomorrow receive its basic skills award.

Ms Morris: I congratulate Mrs. Pearson, her staff and everyone who worked in the school and the community to raise standards. It is interesting that, in specialist sports schools applications, the quality of grades needed to secure designation is possibly higher than in any other specialism. The quality of work developed in such schools—both with students and in the wider community—has the potential to transform what is going on in some quite disadvantaged areas.

I join the hon. Gentleman in applauding the school and in recognising the effects on motivation. The key to being granted specialist school status lies in the preparation that schools and governors have had to undertake to receive the designation. They are required to have a clear head and a clear eye on targets, and to face staff development. They need to ensure that everyone in the school has those targets and objectives as the endgame—they must work together co-operatively to achieve them. We applaud that process, as much as the outcome, in the specialist schools that we have announced today.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): May I tell my right hon. Friend about the spectacular bid that she will receive from Holmesdale community school in Snodland in my constituency? It will bring together the process industries in the Medway valley and it will be one

of the most innovative bids that she will receive. The head teacher, Mr. Ian Hobson, has performed a monumental task; since he arrived at the school, he has dragged it up from a low position, so that it is now going somewhere. If the school can get the status that it wants, that will be the icing on the cake.

I understand that bids have to be entered in March. When will my hon. Friend make an announcement about the next round? Obviously, the schools that are to have a new status in September will need time to prepare.

Ms Morris: I compliment my hon. Friend on his tenacity and admire him for it. He has been lobbying on behalf of the school before I have received the application, which has made it a bit difficult for me to pursue the matter, but that is his job and he does it very well. If the school's application is very innovative, I will look forward to receiving it with greater eagerness than might otherwise have been the case. We hope to announce the results of the next successful round in the summer, and we expect and shall ensure that those schools will have sufficient time to prepare their plans.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): The Minister knows that Liberal Democrat Members support the broad thrust of specialist schools. We are, in particular, delighted that very few of those schools have taken the option of selecting by aptitude.

Does the right hon. Lady agree, however, that the success of specialist schools, particularly in maths, science and modern languages, greatly depends on recruiting high quality teachers? Does she share our disappointment that the figures announced last week show yet another drop in the number of applicants for postgraduate certificate of education courses in all those subjects? Despite golden hellos, we have failed to meet our targets. What does the Minister intend to do to make up that deficit and recruit high-quality teachers who want to work in specialist schools?

Ms Morris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his complimentary remarks about the specialist school programme. I know that his constituency has greatly benefited from the programme, and he has always been kind enough to recognise that.

The hon. Gentleman is wrong about the effect of the golden hellos. Last year, golden hellos in maths and science were responsible for an 18 per cent. increase and a 3 per cent. increase respectively in the numbers of PGCE students beginning courses at the start of this academic year. I am entirely confident that our initiative on golden hellos for modern foreign languages this year will bring about equally good results.

I take seriously the hon. Gentleman's point that it is no good pretending that historically we have found it easy to recruit young and not-so-young teachers to areas of short supply. One of the ways in which specialist schools can contribute is by giving a clear message that the country values teachers in those specialisms. We should put those teachers high on our agenda, and make it clear that their jobs are marvellous, fulfilling and rewarding.

Specialist schools do not have as much trouble recruiting teachers as they might have. The crucial point is that specialist schools will take on the responsibility for training other teachers, and that is how we shall raise standards and, in turn, entice more people into the profession. We need to achieve good teaching in those subjects at school level. With the Green Paper proposals to reform the profession, we will make teaching more attractive and attract the quality and calibre of people that we need.

Beacon Schools

4. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): What steps he is taking to develop new technologies in beacon schools. [103678]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Michael Wills): Beacon schools, like all our schools, are benefiting from the £700 million of investment that the Government are making in information and communications technologies in schools up to 2002. Beacon schools are already using those technologies imaginatively, and they have an important part to play in promoting them in other schools.

Mr. Kidney: When I last spoke to the head teachers of the two beacon schools in Stafford—the primary schools of Barnfields and Oakridge—they both spoke with obvious warmth about their positive experience of beacon school status and the enthusiasm not only in their school but in all the other schools with which they have created links for sharing best practice.

Both head teachers, however, said that they thought their school could do better. One was looking forward to the completion of the third phase of investment in the national grid for learning equipment and contact. The second head teacher would welcome access to greater computing expertise, which the school does not have. Is my hon. Friend hearing similar comments from the head teachers of other beacon schools? Can they look forward to receiving a little extra assistance with information and communications technologies, which will enable them to do their job that much better?

Mr. Wills: I thank my hon. Friend. I am delighted that the beacon school programme has been so warmly welcomed in his constituency. I assure him that there will be further investment in these technologies. Between 2000 and 2002, we are putting something like £450 million into the national grid for learning in England. We are also developing new and imaginative ways of spreading best practice in such schools. On 2 December, we announced an important new partnership with the IBM International Foundation, which will help beacon schools to develop and will further spread best practice.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): There is quite a lot of anecdotal evidence from schools and industry that the Government's rhetoric and resources are admirable, but that their implementation leaves a lot to be desired. Does the Minister have a sense of priority about the recent report from the Cabinet Office entitled "E-commerce at its best.UK", which contained specific objectives for educational achievement in technology? When does he expect to deliver those objectives, because they are much more accelerated than the ones that his Department has announced?

Mr. Wills: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about our programme for the national grid for

learning. I know that he has been a pioneer of many of these technologies for many years, and I welcome that. The reports that we receive from schools suggest that the programme is already having a significant impact. We are working on the standards that we shall expect all children to achieve in the technologies, and we shall make an announcement at the appropriate time.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Although many of us welcome the initiative of beacon schools and the resources that they receive, will my hon. Friend remember that the average school is crucial? In an average school in our constituencies, too often only a nominal one hour a week is spent on the computer. Students cannot use the computers in their classrooms during the lunch break—they are locked out—and they have minimal access to them after school. That is the truth in many of the schools that we visit. Will my hon. Friend redouble his efforts to make sure that average schools open up so that this country can become the leading information-learning country of Europe at the very least?

Mr. Wills: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding us of the needs of all schools. The Government are committed to ensuring that every single school and every single child in this country can benefit from these technologies. That is why we are making the investment that we are. We are investing not just in technology and hardware, but in training teachers through the new opportunities fund, which is providing £230 million to make sure that every teacher in every classroom knows how best to make use of the technologies. My hon. Friend can be assured that we will continue to do that.

Secondary Schools

5. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): What steps he has taken to enable local education authorities to improve a secondary school's infrastructure if pupil numbers are substantially increased. [103679]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): My Department provides financial support where a local education authority has shown that there are insufficient school places in an area to cope with the projected increase in pupil numbers. This support covers the additional teaching area that is needed, as well as any necessary expansion to schools' ancillary areas.

Mr. Jack: I thank the Minister for that reply. However, there seems to be a breakdown between the policy intentions that she has outlined and the reality for the Lytham St. Anne's high technology school in my constituency. She may be aware that it has received a great many extra pupils over the past few years, but the infrastructure of the school has not expanded to meet that demand. For example, there is a restriction on the number of pupils who can take school dinners, because they have a problem in getting them through in the lunch hour. Is there any further guidance that she can offer me on the steps that could and should be taken by Lancashire education authority to deal with that problem? If not, the school will not be able to function as effectively and efficiently as it should to serve the extra pupil numbers.

Jacqui Smith: Given the concern that the right hon. Gentleman has expressed about school infrastructure, I am sure that he will welcome the doubling of investment in school buildings that will be made under this Government.

With respect to the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, the Government have provided financial support for 374 secondary and post-16 places in the Fylde. That support amounts to £2.6 million. I also understand that two major extensions have been completed to the Lytham St. Anne's high school and a 175-place extension is planned. There has also been work to provide additional toilets and a purpose-built staff room. The Government have made the money available to the local education authority, and it appears to be being spent in the school.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): May I take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the more than £170 million package of infrastructural improvements that has been put together for the Bradford district school reorganisation? I commend to my hon. Friend, for example, the project at the Salt grammar school in my constituency, where a new 29-classroom block is being planned to provide for extra pupil numbers. I urge her closely to monitor the financial package in the Bradford district so that we can complete the important transition to the new system on time and to budget.

Jacqui Smith: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the significant resources that the Government put into general investment in school buildings and surplus place reorganisation, and the capital expenditure that that necessitates. I can assure him that we monitor carefully the spending that goes into surplus place reorganisations to ensure that that process takes place and that it is based on value for money; and to ensure also the objectives that the authority has set down.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Does the hon. Lady agree that school sixth form may require expansion to meet demand? Does not the issue of where the capital funding will come from remain unsolved? At the same time, the safeguards that the Government have developed for funding the continuation of sixth forms, let alone their expansion, depends on the flimsiest of defences: a single year of baseline numbers. There is also the threat of withdrawal of sixth forms by the Learning and Skills Council for alleged inadequacy. Does not this amount—in the view of schools and local education authorities—to a set of proposals for 16 to 19-year-olds that aims a pistol at the heart of sixth forms?

Jacqui Smith: The hon. Gentleman is talking nonsense, given the clear objectives that have been laid down by the Government in relation to post-16 education: to bring at last some coherence to the system that funds education and training, to promote high standards for all our children post-16 and to protect school sixth forms that are doing a good job.

To return to the question, we want the doubling of capital investment that the Government have undertaken to ensure that, for all children in school, both pre-16 and post-16, we no longer have what we inherited from the

previous Government: crumbling schools, leaking roofs and a failure to promote the standards that this Government are promoting.

National Child Care Strategy

6. **Mr. Jim Cunningham** (Coventry, South): If he will make a statement on progress made by child care partnerships in meeting targets set for them under the national child care strategy. [103680]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): The early years partnerships and child care partnerships at local level were given a target in the current financial year of creating 82,000 places. By the mid-year point at the end of September, they had tripled that half-year target by creating 76,000 of the 82,000 places. That is more than the number of child care places that were created over the last four years of the Conservative Government.

Mr. Cunningham: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the child care strategy is another example of the Government delivering on their election promises, and that it will go a long way towards helping families?

Mr. Blunkett: That strategy will have the role of providing developmental care for young children, including an additional 48,000 free places for three-year-olds in nursery school that would not have been available but for the Labour Government. It will also free families to make choices about returning to work and about their arrangements to support family learning.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the Pre-School Learning Alliance—I am sure that he, like me, has great respect for that organisation—reports this year that 1,500 playgroups have closed and 1,700 more are likely to close as a direct result of Government policy? Does the right hon. Gentleman believe that that is a helpful contribution to policy?

Mr. Blunkett: I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows that, over the past two years, we have provided £500,000 to help to protect playgroups and other providers when the market changes locally and parents consequently make different choices. Eighty per cent. of the funding that we are making available will go into the private and voluntary sector to provide new places when parents want them. Parents also have the choice of a nursery place rather than a pre-school place.

We want people to work together so that seamless care and nursery education can be provided throughout the day and the week. We are pleased that the Pre-School Learning Alliance has agreed to meet that challenge and work to ensure that we can provide comprehensive care.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): At a recent meeting in Scotland of single-parent organisations, there was unanimous welcome for the money that the Government have provided for pre-school care and care out of school hours. However, the organisations asked what steps had been taken to help parents who need full-time care, or those who work unusual hours—for example, nurses who work shifts and find it impossible to find care for their children.

Mr. Blunkett: There are some interesting experiments in care during working hours to offer family-friendly, flexible working provision, including in the national health service. I will write to my hon. Friend with some examples that can be passed on to the trust and health board in her area, so that parents can use not only formal provision, but excellent child-minding provision, which plays a key part in creating flexibility and ensuring that children receive decent, high-quality care during unsocial working hours.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Whatever the Secretary of State claims in his answers about the number of child care places that are made available, the Department's figures show that the number of places in playgroups and with child minders fell last year. In March last year, the Government said that they would spend £8 billion on child care. In his recent speech on social exclusion and the politics of opportunity, the Secretary of State confirmed that £470 million would be invested in child care in England during this Parliament. Is the difference between the two figures the first sign of the pain that education will suffer as the Government try to fulfil the Prime Minister's pledge on NHS spending—or was the figure of £8 billion simply an aspiration?

Mr. Blunkett: The difference is accounted for by the fact that the £470 million constitutes the direct investment in ensuring that the infrastructure is in place. The total sum for the period to which the hon. Lady refers includes: the working families tax credit disregard, which will invest directly in the parent's choice of provision; investment in nursery education; and the sure start programme, which will play a key part in meeting the needs of children and families and enhancing their capacity to develop informal as well as formal care in the community.

It is not the job of Government alone to provide child care and early-years places. That provision should be made through a partnership between families and the broader community to ensure that there is a range and diversity of care, and that we all fulfil that responsibility.

7. **Mr. Syd Rapson** (Portsmouth, North): In what ways his Department is helping parents to find out about the child care places in their area. [103681]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): All partnerships are developing information services based on minimum service standards. ChildcareLink, a freephone national child care information line, and child care website was launched in December. A separate project to provide local information points in outlets such as supermarkets and doctors' surgeries was piloted in the autumn.

Mr. Rapson: Does the Minister agree that it is essential that mothers and fathers, especially in Portsmouth, North are able to gain not just access to child care, but information on education and employment—in other

words, joined-up information? Does she agree not only that access to child care is important but that confidence that child care facilities are of high quality is equally so?

Ms Hodge: I agree entirely that joined-up information is what parents and families require. The pilots that we have run in supermarkets provided information not just about child care places, but about jobs available locally, training opportunities, benefits and community health services. I also agree that parents will take advantage of the new child care places only if they are assured that those are of a high quality.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): It is not going to be easy for parents to find out about child care places if playgroups are closing. Can we have a straight answer to the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames)? [HON. MEMBERS: "Where is he?"] Why have 1,500 playgroups closed, and why does the Pre-School Learning Alliance suggest that 1,700 will close this year? In a rural area such as mine, playgroups are vital.

Ms Hodge: I am sorry that the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) has left the Chamber. He seems to have gone for an early, and probably a long, lunch.

On the subject of playgroups, it has often been put on the record, and I am happy to put it on record again today, that the real damage to playgroups has been done not by the present Government but by the previous Government, who introduced the ill-conceived nursery voucher system, which was based on competition, not co-operation. Under our system, co-operation through partnerships will ensure a strong role for playgroups in future.

New Deal (Scotland)

8. **Mr. Jim Murphy** (Eastwood): If he will make a statement about the new deai in Scotland. [103682]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): The new deal is working in Scotland. The latest figures show that more than 19,000 young people and more than 2,500 long-term unemployed adults have found jobs through the new deal. We are on course to meet our manifesto commitment of getting 250,000 young people off benefit and into work across Britain.

Mr. Murphy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Is she aware that, despite the opposition of all the parties in Scotland, long-term youth unemployment in Scotland has decreased by three quarters, from just over 16,000 to just over 4,000? Does she agree that the nature of the problem has changed, away from an entire generation that had been ignored and unemployed to a much smaller number of hard-core, long-term unemployed young people, where unemployment may be endemic throughout the family? Can she assure the House that, as the new deal develops and the nature of the problem changes, she will bear those experiences in mind?

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend for those perceptive comments, which reflect a clear understanding of the challenges facing the new deal. He is right to say that, building on the success of the new deal to date, we are turning our attention to providing more intensive support for young people coming on to the first stage of the new deal—the gateway—who lack basic skills and for whom that lack, unless it is addressed, will be a long-term obstacle to their employability. That is an important practical step towards tackling the problem of inter-generational unemployment, to which my hon. Friend referred.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I remind hon. Members who are rising that the question relates entirely to Scotland. I call Mr. Beggs. If he is prepared to put a question relating to Scotland, I will take it.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I represent the constituency in Northern Ireland closest to Scotland.

Madam Speaker: That will not do.

Mr. Beggs: I am now proceeding to my question, Madam Speaker.

I welcome the announced success of the new deal in Scotland, but will the Minister confirm that it has dramatically reduced unemployment not only there, but elsewhere in the United Kingdom? Will she assure the House that she will ask those in the Government who can influence investment and a reduction in unemployment to encourage opportunity for those who come on to the employment market through the new deal? That is the only way in which people who have previously been unemployed can share in the nation's increasing wealth.

Madam Speaker: The Minister should be aware that the substantive question relates entirely to Scotland and her answer must relate to Scotland.

Ms Jowell: I accept your guidance, Madam Speaker. I can confirm that the experience of the new deal in Scotland is representative of that across the United Kingdom. The key issue is the promotion of employability as an important part of maintaining economic stability and the benefits of economic growth.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Now we shall see how close Yorkshire is to Scotland.

Mr. Allan: I understand that the new deal programme in Scotland has underspent considerably in respect of initial projections. Has the Minister had any discussions with her colleagues in Scotland about how to reallocate those resources, and can she explain how future new deal enhancements such as those she described will take place, given the Scottish dimension and the devolution of the programme to the Scottish Parliament?

Ms Jowell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The new deal is a United Kingdom programme and I regularly meet the Scottish new deal task force, to which I pay tribute. Certainly the initial costs have been

lower than anticipated, but my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out clearly in the pre-Budget report the ways in which we shall intensify support for young people and those older people who have been unemployed long term. We shall announce detailed proposals on both sources of additional help in due course.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): My constituency is not the nearest to Northern Ireland, nor to England and Wales, but it is one of the nearest to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy).

Is the Minister aware that, although the new deal has undoubtedly been an enormous success in Scotland, the figures recently produced by the Trades Union Congress show that constituencies where the fall in unemployment has been greatest tend to have the least absolute unemployment? The constituencies that were worst off remain the worst off, even after the introduction of the new deal. Does she accept that many young people who have vanished from the ranks of the unemployed have not gone into jobs, but seem to have disappeared from the registers altogether? There seems to be no record of where they have gone and there should be additional effort and additional expenditure to make sure that the real needs of those youngsters at the very bottom of the pile are followed up.

Ms Jowell: My hon. Friend makes two important points. He referred first to the level of long-term unemployment in respect of which the new deal will build on its success and work harder in areas where unemployment rates have traditionally been highest. We have to redouble our efforts there to ensure that the young and older long-term unemployed people are given the skills to get them off benefit into work.

My hon. Friend's second point is a matter of real concern. Across the United Kingdom, about 160,000 young people appear to have dropped off the edge of our society. The new deal clearly has important help and support to offer them, and I hope that, in due course, we shall be able to introduce proposals to extend help to them.

Skills Development (Trade Unions)

9. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What steps his Department is taking to support the role of trade unions in developing skills. [103683]

10. **Ms Julie Morgan** (Cardiff, North): What steps his Department is taking to support the role of trade unions in developing skills. [103684]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): We have made £12 million available to all trade unions. What we are doing involves 100 projects, and 50 unions working with employers. They have already managed to provide basic skills and development courses for 200,000 employees. That has introduced new possibilities for negotiation and bargaining in the workplace, brought together employers and trade unions in regard to the positive skills agenda, and ensured that more than 1,000 learning representatives have been appointed throughout the work force.

Mr. Pike: I welcome the establishment of the union learning fund, but how many other unions might be able to take advantage of it, and what will be the priority in tackling the need for basic skills?

Mr. Blunkett: The programme has been massively oversubscribed by trade unions wishing to be part of it. As I have said, it involves unions working with employers and, in many instances, working together. Basic skills, including skills in information technology, are a key priority.

It is entertaining to note that the Transport and General Workers Union, working with colleges in the north-west of England, is using transport cafés to lay on information and communication technology courses for road hauliers and coach drivers who are stopping off for half an hour—thus bringing about an entirely new version of "chips with everything".

Ms Morgan: Women now constitute 47 per cent. of the work force and 46 per cent. of trade union membership. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that the principles of equal opportunity apply to all applications to the fund, so that women will have an opportunity to fulfil themselves through the trade union movement?

Mr. Blunkett: I can give that assurance. We are keen for part-time workers to be able to take advantage of the scheme. Along with the local trust in Ipswich and Gardner Merchant, Unison has provided an across-the-board programme of basic in-service training. The National Union of Teachers, working with the Royal College of Midwives, has introduced an exemplary scheme offering information and communications technology training for its members in continuing professional development.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I want to ask about the development of skills by trade unions in my county of Leicestershire. I have here a document sent to me by the six teachers' unions, expressing their wish to develop skills in Leicestershire schools. They say that, unfortunately, because of the reduction in standard spending assessment, 39 per cent. of secondary schools are reducing staff and, moreover, that 30,000 secondary pupils will be in larger classes next year.

Given the desire of trade unions to develop skills and education, will the Secretary of State address the problems that they have raised, which result from a reduction in the education SSA? Furthermore, instead of waffling on about reducing class sizes for children aged five, six and seven, will he accept that class sizes for all other age groups are increasing in Leicestershire and elsewhere?

Mr. Blunkett: First, I will not accept that. Secondly, the SSA has not been reduced, and nor has the revenue support grant to match it. The SSA is going up by 5.3 per cent., and the Department has directly invested £50 million in addition to that. Over the spending review

period, there will be a real-terms increase of 16 per cent. on education, twice as much as the last Government invested throughout the last Parliament.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): As a member of the proletariat and a strong supporter of constructive trade unionism, and recognising that no one in the country has done more to create the climate in which such trade unionism can flourish than my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Tebbit of Chingford, may I assure the Secretary of State that Conservative Members accept that unions can assist in developing skills?

Will the right hon. Gentleman also accept two straightforward points from me? First, whatever unions' inputs to the bargaining for skills programme, employee development schemes, the learning and skills councils and the union learning fund, we will soon need evidence from an independent report of their outputs in terms of the creation of new jobs. Secondly, will the Secretary of State accept that, given that only 19 per cent. of private sector employees are members of trade unions, it is imperative that training should be led by businesses small, medium and large?

Mr. Blunkett: That is precisely why we have indicated that at least 40 per cent. of the places on the new learning and skills councils will be for those who have immediate or immediate past experience of business and commerce. Just to put the record straight for the London TEC Council, a total of £5 billion is going into adult learning.

I accept that Lord Tebbit has enormous experience of trade unionism from the British Air Line Pilots Association. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the association will have access to those funds. What we will not be able to do is use the resources to train people to ride bicycles.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the different tradition of the Workers Educational Association and university extramural education for trade unionists, from which at least three Members who are currently in the House have benefited and from which many others have benefited in the past? Is anything being done to refurbish and remobilise that tradition, which has significant benefit in the spin-off for communities in that non-vocational education is developed?

Mr. Blunkett: Through the national learning and skills councils, the WEA will, for the first time, have direct access to overall national resources, which will be a major boon in sorting out the current disparities in funding throughout the country. As my hon. Friend will be aware, we are keen to learn from the experience of the extramural provision from which he and others have benefited and to replicate it through the residential colleges, which continue to do an excellent job in providing mature students with adult learning on access and diploma courses, which often lead to people not only going into higher education, but returning to the workplace and their community to which they can then contribute the skills and potential that they have been able to develop on those courses.

Teachers (PRP)

11. **Mr. Colin Breed** (South-East Cornwall): If he will make a statement on the funding arrangements for financing performance–related pay for teachers. [103685]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): For an initial period starting in September 2000, we will establish a special grant to target resources for the performance threshold additional to, and separate from, schools' delegated budgets. Schools will be able to draw additional funds from the grant via their local education authority for each teacher who is promoted to the upper pay spine. There will be no quota on threshold successes.

Mr. Breed: Does the Minister accept that, after two years, ring-fenced funding will disappear and schools will be required to meet those threshold payments from their own hard-pressed budgets? Does that not amount yet again to another deferred pay scheme for our hard-pressed teachers?

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman is rather ungenerous. He talks about hard-pressed budgets, but I have just made it clear that we have held money back centrally to fund teachers who go through the threshold, that there will be no quota and that that money will be paid.

We have made it clear that we want to ring-fence the money for two years. That covers the period of the current comprehensive spending review. We will want to learn from what has happened, but there is another tension that the hon. Gentleman must recognise: the wish of heads to control their budget. I think that there is agreement across the political parties that local management of schools has been a good initiative. We do not want to damage that. I hope that, over the next two years, we will get the balance right between giving assurance to heads that LMS will stay and to the teaching profession that extra money is there.

The key message is that the money is there. It is ring-fenced for the next two years. As ever, we will review the position and make announcements on how the scheme will be funded after that.

Ms Joan Ryan (Enfield, North): Last week, I met secondary head teachers at schools in Enfield, North, and a more committed, positive and enthusiastic group one could not wish to meet. They are doing their very best for secondary school pupils in my constituency. They raised the issue of financial resources to support implementation of performance-related pay arrangements. I should like to clarify whether they will be able to use available financial resources to pay for supply cover while they are going through the appraisal process.

Ms Morris: I add my thanks to those that my hon. Friend has already given to secondary school teachers in Enfield, North. She was kind enough to update me on that meeting, and I am very appreciative of all the work that those teachers do. I understand their scepticism. Under the previous Government, they spent 18 years being asked to implement initiatives, but without a penny to support that implementation. I think that that history is why they are still so sceptical about initiatives.

I assure my hon. Friend, however, that the Government have funded the Green Paper initiatives, and all our other initiatives, including training. We have ensured that every school is able to access those opportunities without detriment to the pupils whom they teach.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I listened very carefully to the Minister's answer to the original question on this topic. Performance-related pay for teachers, however, is yet another example of the Government saying one thing but doing another. The Minister talks about the provision of central funds, but the reality—as she herself said in answer to the original question—is that that money is being held back centrally and top-sliced from money provided to local authorities to provide the £150 million required this year to meet pay increases for teachers going through the threshold, despite the fact that Ministers promised that all funding for the scheme would be provided centrally, from the £1 billion that was being allocated.

Will the Minister confirm that that money has been top-sliced from local authorities' budgets—so that, overall, they are receiving less than they had expected—to fund pay increases that the Government have promised to fund centrally? She said that £1 billion would be allocated centrally, and that £150 million is being spent on teachers' pay increases, but how much of that £1 billion is being spent on administering the scheme?

Ms Morris: The hon. Lady has a vivid imagination. The reality is that, even if we exclude the money for threshold payments, the SSA increase to local authorities is 5.4 per cent. If we include the money that will go to local authorities and schools as part of the threshold payment, the increase would come to 6.1 per cent. If she wants an argument about increases of 5.4 and 6.1 per cent., I will have it. But let us be clear: under the previous Government, in not one year did SSA increases anywhere near enough to touch either of those increases.The truth is that, after the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 27 November, funding to authorities as part of the SSA increased by £154 million.

If the hon. Lady adds all the increases together, they total 8.1 per cent., which is a record to be proud of. The increases will deliver higher standards, reform the teaching profession and, for the very first time, ensure that we have in place a mechanism for rewarding our best teachers. That is what we need.

Drugs

12. **Mrs. Ann Winterton** (Congleton): If he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the exclusion of pupils found in possession of controlled drugs while on school premises. [103686]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): Circular 10/99, "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support", issued to maintained schools last July, makes it clear that it is for head teachers to decide whether to exclude permanently for all drug-related incidents, although in some cases excluding for a fixed period may be a more appropriate course of action. We are planning to write to schools very shortly to clarify and simplify some of the exclusion procedures.

Mrs. Winterton: Although I welcome the fact that head teachers should be responsible for exclusions of pupils in possession of controlled drugs, will the Minister say what provision is made for children who are excluded? Are they sent to specialist centres, where they are given treatment to come off drugs? Is the decision about when those children are considered fit enough to return to mainstream education only for head teachers, or is it to be made in consultation with parents and others?

Jacqui Smith: The hon. Lady has made a very important point on the need for schools, with other agencies, to develop policies on keeping children in school—whenever it is possible to do so, without disrupting the education of others—and on ways of ensuring that children who have come into contact with drugs are adequately treated. That is why we are doubling the support available for early intervention on exclusions and truancy and giving the help that all hon. Members want us to provide.

European Directives

13. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): When he last met Ministers in the Department of Trade and Industry to discuss the impact on employment prospects of European directives relating to British business. [103687]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): My right hon. Friend and I often meet ministerial colleagues at the Department of Trade and Industry to discuss various matters, including matters relating to the European Union. Ministers at both Departments represent the UK on the Social Affairs Council, which provides a forum for discussion of European employment legislation.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank the Minister for her answer. Many of us know that she is a reasonable person. We concede that membership of the European Union has brought some benefits to business, but does she accept that some European directives have damaged industry? She will be aware, for example, that the sale of Armitage Shanks in my constituency was a direct result of a European directive resisted by the previous Government but rapidly accepted by the Labour Government. Will she read the report to be published by the Institute of Directors early next week, which undertakes a cost-benefit analysis of the European Union for business? Will she ask her right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to make a statement on the report when it is published?

Ms Jowell: I am happy to study that report when it is published. Ministers at the Department for Education and

Employment and the Department for Trade and Industry believe that the implementation of European directives should not pose undue regulatory burdens on business and should strike a proper balance between fairness at work and the need to keep costs and burdens to a minimum. Yesterday we published figures that show that there are more people in work than ever. We can be proud of that record. We intend to work with our European partners to build on that and ensure greater employability and more people in work in the UK and across the European Union. We shall be working together in Europe, not barking on the fringes.

Millennium Bug

12.32 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): As I promised the House on 15 December, I am reporting back on an event that was unique in human history—the millennium date change—and its effects—

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): What about the year 1000?

Mrs. Beckett: The whole House will agree that the effects of the millennium date change on central Government and the national infrastructure in the UK were a unique event. The unprecedented feature of the date change is that it stimulated an IT project that met its deadline. I am pleased to confirm that so far, as predicted, it is business as usual in the United Kingdom. In what is believed to be the largest co-ordinated project since the second world war, thorough and detailed planning across government and the national infrastructure, both publicly and privately controlled, ensured a smooth transition over the date change.

There is no doubt that the work had to be done. The millennium bug was shown to have the capacity to wreak havoc among services which, though essential, we take for granted. The Government's objective in that work was always to ensure that the bug resulted in no material disruption to essential services. That objective has been achieved.

No Government Department has reported any significant problems. The alert status, contingency arrangements and staff cover of Departments and agencies over the date change meant they could deal quickly with the minor Y2K bug problems that were discovered. Across the national infrastructure, electricity, gas, water and telecoms as well as offshore oil and gas industries continued to operate as normal, and the markets and financial sector successfully resumed full trading on 4 January.

The Government spent an estimated £380 million on tackling the millennium bug in our own systems, although without needing to make special further additions to Departments' budgets. The investment made was both necessary and beneficial. Continued payment of benefits, pensions and child support could be ensured only by essential and major system changes. Many of MAFF's internal systems, such as those for processing common agricultural policy payments on time, required corrective action or replacement.

In the wider public sector, NHS trusts and Government agencies found problems that needed to be fixed. Problems in gas repayment meters and electricity prepayment meters were found and fixed. Elsewhere in the private sector—everywhere from finance to food and transport to telecoms—major potential problems were found and fixed, in time. There were, and no doubt will continue to be, further minor glitches.

Here in the UK, a retailers' card reader problem before the date change affected about 5 per cent. of terminals in shops, and hence the public. Although such problems needed to be rectified, there have been no further reports in either public or private sectors of problems which have caused a significant inconvenience to the public.

The sorts of failures experienced typically have been incorrect date displays appearing on internal reports and read-outs. They have had no impact on customers. Those problems were corrected swiftly and had no impact on operations precisely because organisations were on the alert for problems and had put business continuity plans in place. The same pattern has been evident internationally—no material disruption, but concrete problems. For example, both France and the United States experienced problems with military satellites.

However, the relief that success creates should not obscure the very real difficulties that have been faced and overcome—problems whose nature and scale could indeed have caused major disruption in our economy and society. The failure of many critical systems within a short space of time over the date change would have been disastrous, and literally thousands of faults—many of them serious—had to be dealt with before the date change. The work of Government Departments, of Action 2000 and of service deliverers was vital in ensuring that the infrastructure continued to work as well as it did.

A huge amount of preventive work was done on the bug across the world, including in Russia, Asia, Latin America and Africa. Those who came late to the work benefited from the advice and experience of those already prepared. However, not one of the 173 countries which attended the largest-ever special meeting in the history of the United Nations in June last year failed to recognise that all faced some serious problems.

The investment made will yield real benefits. All organisations have probed their operations in depth, and replaced or discarded much that was out of date or no longer needed. Many have discovered long-standing flaws that were not fully recognised in the past. For example, as part of the work on assessing critical services that might be affected by the year 2000 problem, the Dutch Government identified a resources issue in their emergency call-handling posts—their equivalent of 999—which potentially could have caused the entire system to crash if as few as 140 or so simultaneous calls had been received.

There has been global co-operation in which knowledge has been freely shared. We look forward to that co-operation continuing in many fields. Moreover, there are other lessons to be learned. This was recognised early on as a management issue, and not just an IT issue—and was so handled. That may well be why it came in on time.

Prioritisation of business-critical systems worked. That is why the public experienced little disruption, despite the problems that have arisen. Business continuity planning was successful in working around those problems that did occur and millennium-operating regimes meant they could be and are being fixed. The breadth and depth of that experience will have continuing value.

Similarly, proper and wide-scale planning ensured that 3 million people—by the police's estimate—attended the millennium celebrations in London alone without serious incident, and similar celebrations throughout the UK passed off successfully. I will be publishing in February detailed returns from Departments on the impact of the millennium bug, and this will be followed by a more detailed report on lessons learned and benefits captured.

I would again like to pay tribute from the whole House to the vast number of people in the UK across the public and private sectors who have worked tirelessly to ensure

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no material disruption in the UK as a result of the date change—not least those who staffed the Government's millennium centre, which kept the media and the public informed. Our success in meeting the threat of the millennium bug is testimony to all their efforts.

The UK rose to the challenge of the millennium bug. As one of the world leaders in the field, we successfully advised others on how to meet it and assisted them to do so. For that work, and that of all who made the celebrations possible and successful, we owe a debt of gratitude, and we have together earned the right to pride in what has been achieved.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I thank the right hon. Lady for the early notice that she gave me of this statement and for coming back to the House with a follow-up report on the millennium bug, as she promised to do in December. I join her in congratulating all those in the public and private sector on the work that they have done and the smooth transition that has followed.

Although the Leader of the House paid tribute to many of the organisations and individuals involved, I noted that she did not mention the fact that the project was begun by the previous Government. Given the generosity of her remarks, I hope that she will accept that I wish to pay tribute to those of my colleagues who were involved at an earlier stage in the preparations for that smooth transition.

I hope that the Leader of the House will recognise that, in the final phases of the preparations for the year 2000 change, we were pleased to receive the information that she supplied. That is especially true of the information that she shared with me personally, and I wish to place on record my thanks. The information was both helpful and constructive. I shall miss our exchanges across the Dispatch Box on the subject, but I am sure that there will be other occasions.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. As she says, these exchanges will no longer take place, but they have been constructive and for the general good. As she will be aware from the briefings that we were able to share with her, because so little went wrong in practical terms, compared to what might have happened, the real danger—with the benefit of hindsight—that had to be overcome was a public reaction that might have caused problems that could otherwise have been avoided. The approach that was taken by Opposition Front Benchers under her stewardship was helpful in ensuring that we did not exacerbate a potentially difficult situation. I appreciate that assistance and I am happy to put that on record.

I accept that preparations began just about under the last Government, in July 1996. I am also happy to confirm that the potential impact of the date change was recognised much earlier and very fully by some Conservative Members, not least the hon. Member for Hexham, I think. [HON. MEMBERS: "Bournemouth, East]. I am sorry, I mean the hon. Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson). I have duff information which is the result of human error and nothing to do with the millennium bug. Several hon. Members from both Conservative and Labour parties, including my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), have long taken an interest in the issue and the Government appreciate the support that they gave in helping to raise awareness of potentially difficult problems and in ensuring that that was done in a way that did not create further unnecessary difficulties.

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): I wish to add my thanks to both Front Bench teams for the way in which they have tried to co-operate to tackle the problem. I also wish to thank those who have worked so hard to make the transition appear so seamless. I urge my right hon. Friend robustly to reject the line of opportunists who have claimed, late in the day, that we have wasted vast amounts of public money, which was not the case. Will she also confirm that the management of the central Government Departments ensured that we took the opportunity to make large investments in upgrading to new IT technology? Not only did we overcome the problem of the millennium bug, but we have sound investment in IT for the next two to three years.

Mrs. Beckett: My right hon. Friend is entirely right. I hoped and anticipated that he would be here, as I want to pay considerable tribute to him. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) was understandably anxious to gain credit for those Conservative Members who had taken some action on this matter, but I know that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) is very well aware of the great step change required by the programme and in the funding for it. He made that change within three weeks of the general election that brought this Government into office.

My right hon. Friend may not have spotted the fact in the information that has been made available, but he will be happy to learn that his initial forecast of the cost to central Government of dealing with the problem was accurate to within £10 million. That is because, contrary to early projections, a possible increase in the required expenditure has turned out not to be necessary. That is a rare example of an accurate forecast of the cost of such a project.

However, my right hon. Friend is also right to stress the value of the investment that has been made, and the potential dangers. British Nuclear Fuels plc had reported that fire alarm systems in some of our nuclear power plants were not compliant. It could have been very serious if an alarm had failed to work in the event of fire. My right hon. Friend will know that the United States Government took the trouble to keep running three non-compliant systems alongside the equipment that replaced them. All three of the non-compliant systems in that control group failed.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): The Leader of the House is right to praise IT staff in the United Kingdom across the board for their work on the project. However, as Chairman of the Information Committee, I should like to add my thanks to the many staff in Parliament who kept our systems running perfectly throughout the millennium period.

An IT professional commented to me yesterday that he thought that we should have a millennium bug every year—not to create work for staff in the IT sector, but because he said that the bug problem had forced reluctant

managements to modernise their systems in a way that they would not otherwise have done. The right hon. Lady was right to refer to the matter as a management issue.

Will the right hon. Lady consider building on the structures set up to deal with the millennium bug to ensure that all sectors are talking to each other as we move into a world increasingly dependent on IT, and in which IT systems are increasingly interdependent on each other?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who chairs the Information Committee of the House. He and his colleagues were instrumental in examining what the House needed to do. I entirely share his view that, as always, the staff of the House deserve a great tribute from us for their work in keeping our systems going.

The hon. Gentleman is also right to identify some of the benefits that have emerged. The forced modernisation of systems is certainly a factor, but top managements across the developed world—and especially in countries such as our own—have been forced to engage with the questions of why and how they use IT, in a way that has not happened before. That has had considerable benefits already. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that part of the work now being undertaken is to identify and capture those benefits, for Government and across the wider economy.

A number of valuable lessons have been learned. For example, it appears that the extent of contact with small and medium-sized companies through the Government's information programme on this matter has been greater than in any previous programme.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. For the first time since I came to the House, a statement for which I asked at business questions one Thursday has been delivered the following one.

My right hon. Friend raised an important point in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) concerning the benefits that have been identified throughout the country. Would it not be helpful if Departments, when they make their reports, identified the benefits that have accrued to them, in terms both of the year 2000 issue and of the other managerial changes brought about as a result of the exercise?

Mrs. Beckett: I am glad to have been able to satisfy my hon. Friend's request on this occasion, but I hope that he will not take that as a precedent. It is not always so easy to arrange statements.

My hon. Friend is entirely right to identify the need for Departments to work out and declare the benefits that have accrued to them, and to learn from them. That is exactly what we are seeking to encourage them to do.

Mr. David Atkinson (Bournemouth, East): That this country has avoided problems so far is great credit to the right hon. Lady, the right hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark), Action 2000 and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) pointed out, the previous Government, who established Task Force 2000 in response to my Adjournment debate in May 1996. However, will the right hon. Lady confirm that we are not yet out of the wood, since many computer systems have yet to come up against a millennium computer date that they will not recognise, and since a special threat is still posed—a unique threat for this century—by leap-year day, 29 February. Will the right hon. Lady warn against complacency?

Mrs. Beckett: I am happy to endorse the hon. Gentleman's remarks, and I am grateful to him for his kind remarks about me. I suspect that we are all a great deal happier to share the credit today than we would have been had we had to share the blame instead. But that is fine—it is in the national interests as well as in ours.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that we are by no means out of the wood. Although I say that prioritisation and contingency planning worked—that is a very important lesson—and we have, as far as one can judge, avoided almost completely any impact that would cause problems for the public, the hon. Gentleman, and others in this House who have expertise and have been following the issue, will know that we have not avoided impact altogether. Hundreds of examples of problems—some of them quite serious in terms of running organisations—have occurred across the world and will have to be tackled. I have no doubt that many others will be uncovered.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we are seeing something of a recurrence of a problem that he will recall from the very beginning. The greatest difficulty then was getting people to share information because their lawyers told them not to, apart from anything else. People who have problems do not necessarily tell the world about them so, while not encouraging the blame-game that exposes organisations that have had difficulties, we must ensure that they and others learn from them. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that problems will occur until the end of year at the very least, and people must be aware of that.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): May I also add my congratulations to everyone involved? Will my right hon. Friend's report give a Department-by-Department analysis of embedded chips and their cost and, if possible, put that information in the public domain?

Secondly, I echo some of the remarks that have already been made, in that neither this Government nor the previous one have, in the past 10 years, received plaudits for the way in which they bought and delivered computer systems. We are all guilty. The people who have has been involved in the preparations have clearly learned a huge amount. It would be great if my right hon. Friend's report could recommend that they take over the way in which computers are bought and designed, and systems put into place. That would stop a huge amount of waste. Will my right hon. Friend consider that?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, and it is one of the issues that will have to be considered when the reports come in. I have taken note of his point about embedded chips. I have a feeling that we may have already asked Departments to do that, but I will make sure that his point is conveyed. There have been some comments in the press to the effect that, internationally, people did not bother to do things. A good example of latecomers benefiting from the experience of others is that people could identify where it really

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mattered to search for embedded chips and where it was pretty unimportant. My hon. Friend is right to identify that as an area of work that needs to be covered.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the right hon. Lady accept in retrospect that this is an illustration of both sides of the House coming together and of the House working at its best? The right hon. Lady said that there was no reason for undue alarm, although she could not hit the notion on the head entirely. However, people are suggesting that there will still be a major problem when we move from 00 to 01, at the end of this year and the start of the next. Will she analyse that in the report which she says that she will publish in February?

Mrs. Beckett: The report may well touch on those issues. The right hon. Gentleman will know that that is one of the points at which there may be further problems, but everyone who has been involved with the project recognises that there will never be another crunch point when so many different occasions come together as did at new year. For those who think that this is not really the millennium and who have strong views about the technicalities, there may be great celebrations next year, but most of us will not be celebrating on quite the same scale. The combination of events exacerbated the scale of the problems and the difficulties of dealing with them.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): In her report, will my right hon. Friend take account of three lessons in particular? First, will she consider the international co-operation, particularly the presence of Russian officers at various centres over the new year? The same process should be repeated when other crises arise so that an exchange of information may continue. Secondly, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) courageously decided to put a great deal of information into the public domain against the conventional wisdom. Will the Government learn lessons from that about the benefits of freedom of information and open government, and will my right hon. Friend bring the point to the Home Secretary's attention? Thirdly, will she take note of charlatans who continue to provoke doom and gloom long after corrective action that they had asked for has been taken?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend, like my hon. Friends the Members for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), took a great interest in the millennium bug and have followed things carefully. My hon. Friend is entirely right about international co-operation. The Government have received great credit across the Commonwealth because of the practical support and financial advice that we gave. He was correct, too, to say that the co-operation between the militaries of the United States and Russia was unprecedented, and I am confident that other benefits will arise.

My hon. Friend was also correct to refer to the risks taken, and the courage shown, by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields. I have said many times that Britain was seen as a world leader on the millennium bug, among the principal reasons for which were our communication across the national infrastructure and our putting information into the public domain. People, including the United States co-ordinator, went on the record to recognise the worth of that.

My hon. Friend will recognise that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary shares his view about the worth of releasing information, but is concerned to ensure that the proper balance is struck in decisions about how to release information. My hon. Friend was quite correct in his general remarks about the benefits arising from our handing of the matter and the likelihood of long-term knock-on effects.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Leader of the House rightly said that we owe a debt of gratitude to the teams of software writers who ensured that we did not endure a national disaster. Does she accept that many of them were freelancers? Does she realise that we face a second millennium bug when the Government impose IR35 on 5 April? Is she aware that that will drive thousands of software writers and other information technology experts out of the United Kingdom? Thank God we shall have no major millennium problem next year because, if we did, we would be unable to cope with it once the software writers had left this country to earn money abroad.

Mrs. Beckett: The nature of the millennium bug project and the degree to which it affected the national interest meant that few people tried to make party politics out of it. One exception was the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) who, along with his many more unconstructive and, with the benefit of hindsight, entirely nonsensical remarks, demanded that I should take the blame for anything that went wrong over the millennium. The other exception is the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant)—typical.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I, too, declare my interest in the subject and thank the public services for defeating the bug. Does the Leader of the House think that the experience gained over the past year will help to ensure that future IT programmes for the various Departments will be finished on time; will not cost far in excess of the original estimates; will be bug free; and will work?

Mrs. Beckett: Although I would be too cautious to say that that would be the case, the hon. Gentleman is entirely right to state that those are the characteristics of the project and that they teach us some important lessons. The project can be achieved, if it is tackled in the right way—with the right objectives and management. Not only does that teach important lessons: it undermines the arguments of those who, on many other occasions, on many other IT projects, say that it is impossible to do those things. It is not impossible, if we get it right. The challenge to us all is to get those projects right in the future.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Those computer systems that were sensible enough to devote 11 bits to the date so as to allow four digits were resilient. However, doom and gloom will strike on 31 December 2048. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that she is working night and day in order to eliminate difficulties at that date?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He has now sensibly placed it in *Hansard*;

consequently, I am confident that it will be noted by the Government of the day—in which it is just possible I may not be serving. Let me acquaint him and the House with the fact that my report to the Prime Minister on this matter included the suggestion made to me that there may be knock-on effects when today's new-borns retire. Although I am aware that my right hon. Friend bows to no one in his regard for his children, or in his responsibilities as a father, I took the view that he might not be too worried about the pension of a child who is not yet born.

Business of the House

1.1 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business next week will be as follows.

MONDAY 24 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Disqualifications Bill.

The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration at 7 o'clock.

TUESDAY 25 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Electronic Communications Bill.

Remaining stages of the Disqualifications Bill.

WEDNESDAY 26 JANUARY—Progress on remaining stages of the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

THURSDAY 27 JANUARY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

FRIDAY 28 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

I will give the House as much as I am able of the provisional business for the following week.

MONDAY 31 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Utilities Bill.

THURSDAY 3 FEBRUARY—Motions on the Police Grant Report (England and Wales).

Motions on Local Government (Finance) Reports.

FRIDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

I fear that, in the slight uncertainty occasioned by the changes in business that I had to announce last night, I am not able to identify today the business that will be taken in the middle of the week. However, the House will want to learn that, subject to the progress of business—I emphasise that point—I propose that the House should rise at the end of business on Tuesday 22 February and would not sit on 23, 24 and 25 February.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The House is grateful for next week's business and for the indication of the business for part of the following week. Although we welcome the announcement of what is not so much a constituency week but a constituency half-week, does the right hon. Lady agree that the value of such an announcement is enhanced the earlier that it can be made?

Will the right hon. Lady tell the House the date of the Budget? Will she tell us on which day next week there will be a statement by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the introduction of a new television tax?

In relation to today's business, I much regret that, at short notice last night, the Government decided to guillotine an important constitutional Bill. Although the Government put down motions to suspend the 10 o'clock rule in the name of the Prime Minister, when we reach 10 o'clock, they turn into a pumpkin and go home. The Government appear to prefer to curtail debate rather than to engage in it. Will the right hon. Lady confirm that it is vital that appropriate consideration is given to constitutional measures, even if it means sitting after 10 o'clock?

Would it not have been appropriate today to have a statement on the Wakeham report? Although we would not expect the Government to outline their policy, Members would have welcomed the opportunity to press

[Sir George Young]

Ministers on timing. The Government are more interested in gesture than reform on this matter and, having urged Lord Wakeham to make haste, they now appear anxious to delay. Can we have an early debate so that we can press the Government on the timing and membership of a Joint Committee and on progress with the promised independent statutory appointments commission to end the Prime Minister's patronage of the second Chamber, which Lord Wakeham condemned?

After the Home Secretary's performance last week, when his decision on Pinochet was issued to the press before any announcement was made to the House, can we have an assurance that there will be no repeat of that discourtesy and that, when he reaches his final decision, the House will be the first to hear it?

Mrs. Beckett: I entirely accept the right hon. Gentleman's point that the value of the non-sitting days in February—or indeed of any non-sitting days—is greatly enhanced if the House has early notice of them. I regret that it has not been possible to give more notice, but he will know fully the reasons for that.

I cannot yet give the right hon. Gentleman the date of the Budget, but I hope to do so shortly, and I hope that that is helpful.

The right hon. Gentleman said that he regretted that a statement is not being made on the Wakeham report. I remind him that the report, which is a royal commission report to the Government, has barely been published, so it is a little early to make a statement. He suggested that the Government are more interested in gesture than reform. That comes fine from a member of a party that was not interested in reform at all and now shows every sign of being torn between gesture and reform. The Government are not anxious to delay. I can only say to the right hon. Gentleman that, when people have had an opportunity to consider the report, we shall decide what to say in the House.

The right hon. Gentleman is of course right to say that Lord Wakeham made observations about patronage, but it is a little churlish of him not to recognise that this Prime Minister is the first in history to be prepared to diminish his patronage by one jot. Not one Tory Prime Minister was ever prepared to do so. Indeed, recent Conservative Prime Ministers used their powers of patronage to stack the other place with Tory peers to bolster their numbers among hereditary peers.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned last night's decision on a guillotine. He knows perfectly well that that was on an important constitutional Bill, and the Government share his view on that, which is why we are putting forward a timetabling motion to provide an opportunity for discussion on the Bill. It is right that important constitutional matters should be fully debated. However, the right hon. Gentleman may not be aware that last night's debate concerned issues such as the use of the words "temporary" and "verifiable" in a Bill. I do not think that anyone who was here last night—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The right hon. Lady was not here.

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman, who speaks from a sedentary position, is entirely right to say that I was not in the Chamber—although I was in the House—and I am profoundly thankful for that since I did not have to listen to him wasting the time of the House.

On Pinochet, the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) is not quite correct; the Government did not make an announcement to the press first. The Chilean embassy released information to the press and the Government then had to acknowledge whether it was correct. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary made it plain that he had every intention of making that announcement in the proper way in the House. He will come to the House when he has a further announcement to make on that matter.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Leaving aside Pinochet's defenders and apologists on the Conservative Benches, will my right hon. Friend tell the House whether the Home Secretary will make his statement before Pinochet leaves the country, if his decision is that he should leave?

While we are on the subject of those held responsible for crimes against humanity, I should like to ask my right hon. Friend about the person featured in today's newspapers, particularly *The Guardian*, who is said to have been a concentration camp murderer during the war. Is there to be a statement about him?

Mrs. Beckett: First, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will report to the House when he has had the opportunity to consider the representations that have been made to him. He will then make a full statement to Parliament. I shall draw my hon. Friend's comments to my right hon. Friend's attention.

On the issue that has been reported in today's press, my hon. Friend will know that it is a new report, which is being considered. It will be a matter for the police to investigate what offence, if any, has been committed. That will be the basis of any decision about prosecution that is made by the relevant authorities.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): May I endorse the request for an early statement—I appreciate that it cannot be made in the next few hours, but it could be made in the next few days—on the Government's attitude to the Wakeham report and, particularly, to the timetable for any implementation of the proposals? Will the Leader of the House acknowledge that the Government recognise that an interim, transitory arrangement for the composition of the other place would not be satisfactory on a long-term basis? It would leave everyone with a considerable period of doubt and indecision, which is unsavoury in a settled constitution.

May I ask two questions about next week's business? First, I know that the Government are making arrangements for amendments to the Disqualifications Bill to be tabled in advance of its Second Reading on Monday. However, it is profoundly unsatisfactory to have Second Reading and then so little time before the Bill's remaining stages. We shall not even be able to take into account Ministers' statements on Second Reading to ensure that we have tabled the right amendments for the remaining stages on the very next day. Will the right hon. Lady please try to avoid that in future? It may not be such a controversial Bill, but some Members think that it is. We face a profoundly unsatisfactory way of dealing with the business of the House.

Secondly, on the Financial Services and Markets Bill which will come before us on Wednesday, will the right hon. Lady tell us what progress she has made with Conservative representatives in trying to reach agreement on a programme motion? It is surely the type of Bill that requires such a motion. Even in the light of the ridiculous shenanigans of last night, I hope that she still has some opportunity to talk to her opposite numbers on the Conservative Front Bench, so that we can agree on how to handle the business of the House more satisfactorily.

Mrs. Beckett: First, I am well aware that the hon. Gentleman was here last night, and I recognise his remarks about the Wakeham report. The whole House is grateful to Lord Wakeham and his colleagues for their hard work and for meeting what was described by others as too tight a deadline. The report has been published for only two hours or so, but its publication is noteworthy because, as I understand it, it is a unanimous report. I hope that that will mean that it will lay the foundations for a reasonable degree of common ground to emerge. The hon. Gentleman will know that I have always held and expressed the view that, following the publication of the royal commission report, there might be a broad acceptance of some of the principles that it has set out. That might make the way forward rather smoother, but it is too early to say whether that will be the case.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the Disqualifications Bill. He is right—I am grateful to him for allowing me to put it on the record again—to say that the Government are making arrangements to ensure that amendments can be tabled and that Members do not lose that opportunity. We would not usually wish to make such arrangements, but he will be aware that we are bringing the position with regard to Ireland and Irish Members into line with that which exists for some other legislatures. In that sense, we are not making a major decision and it is not in any way without precedent. The precedent is that this different arrangement is in line with that for other legislatures. However, I accept the hon. Gentleman's point entirely.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked me about progress on a programme motion for the Financial Services and Markets Bill. He will know that programme motions are always on offer from the Government. We very much share the view that was expressed at the outset of this Parliament by the all-party Modernisation Committee, of which he is a member, on the worth of programme motions. They offer a way of ensuring that key parts of legislation are discussed and not overlooked because the House has got bogged down—sometimes for sound reasons and sometimes not—on more minor issues. Up to now, it has been suggested that a programme motion is not necessary because there is agreement on how we handle the Bill and deal with business expeditiously to ensure that the issues that are identified as being of major importance are fully dealt with. It may be that we shall need a few further discussions on the matter, and we are certainly prepared to undertake them.

Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is about time that the Modernisation Committee considered urgently the use of, and the need for, more programme motions? Does she agree also that it is troubling that the shadow Leader of the House talks about more predictability, the problem of not knowing when the February half week is and the importance of knowing the nature of other business? Yet he still condones not having a planned agenda for the House, which would allow everyone to know what business will be discussed and when. We are wasting not only our time, but the valuable time of civil servants and the employees of the House when we are discussing et cetera ad nauseam.

Madam Speaker: Is the hon. Lady asking for a debate on the matter?

Lorna Fitzsimons: Yes, Madam Speaker.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Like the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), she is a member of the Modernisation Committee. She will know that the issue of whether we are making the use of programme motions, as anticipated by the Committee, has been raised on quite a few occasions on the Floor of the House, and increasingly so in recent times. However, she is entirely right to raise the matter. It may be that as we are keeping under review the Committee's recommendations, which were made before I was a member of it, perhaps the matter that she has raised should be put on the agenda to ascertain whether we are implementing even the spirit, or the letter, of any of the recommendations.

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): Is it not surprising and regrettable that, given all the interviews and briefings that have already taken place, no statement is being made today about change in the House of Lords? I press on the Leader of the House the urgency of a debate on the future of the House of Lords. I hope that she recognises that there will be some in the House who do not want to see a new political establishment formed of appointers and appointees, and would much prefer to have a fully elected second Chamber.

Mrs. Beckett: I am surprised to hear someone of the right hon. Gentleman's experience and seriousness making such a point. I have seldom heard a more ludicrous suggestion that the Government should make a statement about a report that they have not drawn up and that was correctly not given to them in advance. The right hon. Gentleman talks about briefings as if they are being given by Ministers. Of course they are not. Ministers are not members of the royal commission. It is the royal commission that is briefing on its report to the Government. It is ridiculous to suggest that the Government should make a statement when there has not been time to assimilate it.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman talks about his opposition to what he calls a new political establishment. His zeal for reform has overtaken him only since the Conservative party lost the enormity of the majority that it previously enjoyed in the House of Lords. It still has a majority there, but no one would think so to hear the way that Conservative Members talk about it.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the fact that the person against whom war crimes have been alleged on the front page of *The Guardian* is resident in my constituency? I add to what was said earlier and urge

[Dr. Phyllis Starkey]

her to ask my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to make a statement on this matter, and particularly on whether the Crown Prosecution Service, in the light of the new evidence, will consider again whether a prosecution should be proceeded with under the War Crimes Act 1991.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. She will appreciate that we are talking about early reports. I do not think that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will yet have had the opportunity to come to a decision on whether there is a matter on which he needs to make a statement. I will draw my hon. Friend's remarks to his attention, especially her observations about the Crown Prosecution Service. I hope that that is helpful.

Mr. Forth: Notwithstanding the Leader of the House's failure to explain the Government's lack of response, even at an early stage, to the Wakeham Committee's recommendations, will she give an undertaking that the Government will respond next week, if only to underline the urgency of the matter and to explain the Government's intentions for the next stage of the process? The people of this country should know the shape of their legislature before the next election. Otherwise, the impression will be given that the Government are prevaricating because the Prime Minister wants to perpetuate the position whereby he appoints Members of one of the Houses of Parliament.

Mrs. Beckett: I shall certainly not undertake to make a statement next week. As for the rubbish about one of the Houses being appointed by the Prime Minister, I point out that eight Prime Ministers have contributed to the life membership of the House of Lords, and that 90 or so hereditary peers remain there. The Conservative party retains a majority over the Labour party in the House of Lords. I do not believe that that represents the views of most people in this country.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate, or a statement, on the job losses that have been announced in the water industry throughout the country, including in Severn Trent, which is in my area? At the same time, the water companies are announcing record profits and record dividend payments to their shareholders.

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot promise an early statement on the matter, but I shall draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend who has responsibility for the water industry. The water regulator has said that his proposals do not require the industry to make such changes. Every time the water industry has been required to take steps about which it is unhappy, it has threatened job losses. The public will find its actions hard to understand.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 294.

[*That this House is appalled by the Muslim-Christian conflict in the Moluccas, Indonesia; notes that over 1,500 people have died since the violence began in January 1999; is deeply concerned by reports that the Indonesian military have often taken sides in the conflict instead of attempting to restore order; and calls on the British Government to press for urgent UN intervention in the Moluccas to end the bloodshed and to closely link the European Union arms embargo and suspension of IMF assistance to Indonesia to the Indonesian Government and military's conduct over the Moluccas.*]

Had I followed the advice of the Leader of the House last week, I would have incurred your wrath, Madam Speaker, by trying to raise the matter in Foreign Office questions although it was not on the Order Paper. I plead again for an early statement on Indonesia. Not only are people dying unnecessarily there, but a democratic Government could be overthrown by conspiracy between elements of the army and some fanatic Islamic fundamentalists. It is a potential tragedy.

Mrs. Beckett: I shall draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. Although the matter is under consideration, I cannot guarantee that a statement will be made about Indonesia, which is arousing considerable international anxiety. We are exploring ways of assisting reconciliation in that unhappy country. I hope that the events that the hon. Gentleman suggests may happen will not come about.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): I want to return to the sad position at the end of business last night. I support the Opposition's right to deploy the tactics that are at their disposal, just as we used the guillotine. However, many hon. Members from the 1997 intake are less tolerant of such procedures. If my right hon. Friend is prepared to consider more timetabling, or tactics that will enhance the business of the House, a willing group of us will fully support her.

Mrs. Beckett: I thank my hon. Friend for his offer of support. Of course, it is the right of the Opposition and the Government to use the tools that are at their disposal. I have always believed that the public do not understand when we spend a great deal of time discussing matters that are of no importance and complain that we have no time to consider important issues. I have always deplored that tactic, and never practised it, even during the long years we spent in opposition. It brings this place into disrepute with the public. My hon. Friend is right to say that that, from time to time, successive Governments have had to take action to resolve a growing problem that causes difficulties.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Does the Leader of the House accept that motion 6 on the Order Paper today dealing with the Disqualifications Bill is a procedural disgrace? Not enough time has been arranged between Second Reading and Committee for amendments to be tabled in the proper way. That is not acceptable from the Leader of the House, who leads the Select Committee on Modernisation, which urges that there should be full and proper consideration of all legislation.

Will the right hon. Lady arrange for a statement next week by one of the Law Officers about the potential closure of smaller magistrates courts? In parts of Devon, people will have to travel 20, 30 or 40 miles to go to

court. It is not acceptable for working courts such as that at Axminster to be closed. There must be a statement about that from a Law Officer.

Mrs. Beckett: The issue of time has been raised. The Government recognise that the two stages are somewhat close together, but we have made arrangements to tackle that. From time to time, it is necessary to make such decisions, as the right hon. Gentleman is well aware.

The right hon. Gentleman also asks me about smaller magistrates courts. I draw his attention to the fact that there is an Adjournment debate on that matter in Westminster Hall next Tuesday. The debate has been raised by one of his hon. Friends, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), so the right hon. Gentleman will have to take the matter up with that hon. Member. Although I cannot promise to bring the Law Officers to the House, we will have questions to the Law Officers in the near future.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): After the obnoxious tactics adopted yesterday by hard-line Conservative opponents of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill, will my right hon. Friend assure the Bill's many supporters in the House and all those outside this place who abhor cruelty to animals that she will arrange for a Second Reading debate on that Bill as soon as possible?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right. It was plain—indeed, it was admitted by at least one offender last night—that the tactics deployed yesterday had nothing whatever to do with the importance of the Representation of the People Bill or the time required for it. My hon. Friend is also right to say that many people will deplore and fail to understand those tactics. I assure her that the Government will make sure that the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill reaches the statute book. It was yet another crass misjudgment on the part of the Opposition.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): As the Member for Macclesfield, which lies in the north-west, may I draw the right hon. Lady's attention to early-day motion 279, entitled "Location of the national athletics stadium".

[*That this House notes the complete failure of the proposed National Athletics Stadium at Wembley; notes that the Commonwealth Stadium in Manchester could be altered at relatively little cost to meet the specifications for a national stadium; urges the Government to give full consideration to any bid by Manchester to host the National Stadium; and believes such consideration would demonstrate the Government's commitment to the regions outside London.*]?

In the light of the failure of the project at Wembley, is the Leader of the House aware that there is a strong feeling across the party political spectrum, particularly in the north-west and in Greater Manchester, that the stadium could be located in the city of Manchester, and that it could be provided at very little cost to the British taxpayer? Will she assure the House that a Minister, preferably the Minister for Sport, will make a statement in the House within the next few days on the matter, giving an assurance that the Government will give serious consideration to the interests of Manchester and the construction of the stadium in that area? That would be widely supported and would show that the Government were not entirely obsessed with London and the south-east.

Mrs. Beckett: Of course, I am well aware that the hon. Gentleman is the Member for Macclesfield, through which I passed on Thursday on my way to the north-west, including Manchester, where my ear was bent about Manchester's urgent desire to have the athletics stadium.

As a native of that part of the world, I recognise that Manchester is undoubtedly the capital of the universe and that that status is not properly represented. *[Interruption.]* I am saying that not only because I am being heckled by the Deputy Chief Whip from a sedentary position. I am well aware of the pressure across the party political spectrum. I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are also aware of it. I cannot undertake to ensure the decision that the hon. Gentleman wants, but I shall draw his request for a statement on the matter to their attention.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): My right hon. Friend will recall that shortly before Christmas Opposition Members complained loudly that business had collapsed early a number of times that week. That happens for only one reason—they are not doing their job properly, which did not happen when we were in opposition. Last night, the situation was almost the reverse as they engaged in tactics that brought no credit whatever to the House. I want a debate on modernisation and the procedures of the House so that they can explain their apparent inconsistencies.

Mrs. Beckett: As always, my hon. Friend makes an interesting point. He is certainly right about the inconsistency that is so frequently displayed by Conservative Members, but I fear that, if we were to try to find time to debate it every time it manifests itself, we would not have time to do anything else.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Lady may be aware of a letter that I have written to the Secretary of State for Social Security about winter fuel payments to males. She may also be aware that men in Lincolnshire aged between 60 and 65 who have applied for winter fuel payments appear to have been told that the infrastructure is not in place to make any payments, notwithstanding the ruling of the European Court. If that be true, it is unsatisfactory. Will she therefore arrange either an early debate or a statement on the matter? On another issue, is it not unsatisfactory that Monday's opposed private business is fixed for 7 o'clock and therefore likely to truncate debate on the very important Disqualifications Bill?

Mrs. Beckett: I am aware that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has raised the issue of winter fuel payments. He will be aware, too, that we shall comply with the decision of the European Court, but it is quite recent and I understand that it will take time to register all those who are newly eligible. We have every intention of making the backdated payments as soon as possible and obviously the infrastructure for that has to be dealt with. He also made a point about the Disqualifications

[Mrs. Beckett]

Bill. He will know that it is the norm for such opposed private business to be taken at 7 o'clock and that how business proceeds is a matter for the House.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): In the hope that I am on a winning streak with my right hon. Friend, may I bring to her attention the positive remarks made by the assistant chief constable of Cheshire on Government policy on closed circuit television? Will she consider early-day motion 283—which was tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones), other Welsh Members and myself—on the successful use of technology in solving crime.

[*That this House congratulates Dyfed and Powys, Gwent and South Wales constabularies, which by collaboration made a number or arrests in the second week of January including an alleged persistent young offender, following the use of new technology currently under trial developed by 2B Research and BT; recognises that the arrests took place within a short period of time due in the main to the use of PNIP, retrieving information from neighbouring forces; and calls upon the Home Secretary to consider a national application of this system.*]

Can we have an early debate on the Government's approach to improving technology to help the police in their difficult task?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing to my attention the remarks of the assistant chief constable. He will know that the Government are investing about £153 million over the next three years on CCTV schemes. We believe that that method of crime prevention is very much what the public want, although I fear I cannot undertake to have an early debate on the matter. I acknowledge the remarks made by my hon. Friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones) and others about the use and value of new technology in this area and the Government will continue to pursue such steps to reduce the impact of crime.

Sir David Madel (South–West Bedfordshire): The Government are always saying that they want more public support for what they are doing and their legislation to pass through the House smoothly. Given the amount of controversial legislation that we are dealing with, can we have an assurance that no more controversial Bills will be introduced this Session, apart from the Finance Bill?

Mrs. Beckett: It is becoming increasingly difficult to define what some Members—excepting the hon. Gentleman and, frequently, Conservative Front Benchers—think of as controversial. Indeed, that is not always possible to identify, and it seems to take hours to deal with matters that were non-controversial until they reached their final minutes in the House. I cannot give him quite the undertaking he seeks, but I can certainly tell him that the Government shall continue to introduce the programme that was outlined in the Queen's Speech, which we believe is the programme that the public want.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): May we have a debate on early-day motion 2?

[*That this House applauds the Government's intention to ensure that all pensioners entitled to income support receive it, making it a genuine minimum income guarantee; notes that, although the minimum income guarantee was introduced in April 1999, the promised national programme of measures to maximise take-up is still awaited; and urges the Secretary of State for Social Security to announce that claims made by pensioners after the date of that announcement will be treated as having been made on that date and that arrears of benefit will be paid accordingly.*]

The motion, which was signed by 63 Members, seeks a take-up campaign for the poorest pensioners.

The situation is urgent. According to the Government's figures, 700,000 of the poorest pensioners are losing, on average, £18.18 a week. Action was promised in July 1998 by the Secretary of State for Social Security, who said that data matching would begin in April 1999, but nothing has happened. I was told yesterday in a written answer that action would be taken in the future, but no date could be given.

Early-day motion 2 asks for all the backdated money lost by pensioners to be repaid when action is taken. The pensioners lost the money not through any fault of their own, but through the fault of Government, and it would be wrong for it to be pocketed by the Treasury.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right to identify the continuing problem involving claims at the lower levels, especially claims by pensioners. Like me, he has deplored it for a long time. The Government try to encourage take-up, and will continue to do so: indeed, the minimum income guarantee, which is earnings-linked, is intended to encourage pensioners to claim.

I cannot give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks. As he will know, the legislation provides for payment to be backdated to the point at which the claim was made. My hon. Friend will also know that the problem has been going on for decades, and was not solved or even tackled by the Conservatives. It would be difficult to set a precedent by backdating payment to the point at which a claim might have been made. Nevertheless, I endorse my hon. Friend's basic point, which is that many people—the oldest, the frailest and those in most need of financial support—remain reluctant to claim. It is the responsibility of all Members to do all that we can to encourage them to do so.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): In a week in which talks with Pakistan about the arms trade have resumed and the embargo on the arms trade with Indonesia—which is very unstable—has been lifted, and on a day on which we have heard that Hawk jets are to be sold to Zimbabwe, which is engaged in a severe civil war throughout sub-Saharan Africa, it is obvious that the Government have dropped the ethical dimension to their foreign policy. Can we please have an urgent debate on the effect of the arms trade on foreign policy?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady has drawn on a number of examples. She will know that the embargo on arms sales to Indonesia was for a fixed period, and has expired rather than being specifically lifted. Indeed, it was introduced largely on our initiative following the problems in East Timor.

I do not accept that the Government have abandoned an ethical dimension to their foreign policy. In comparison with those who accept that there is legitimacy

in some arms sales, those who oppose all arms sales are, in a sense, on an easy wicket. There will always be matters of difficulty and dispute.

I fear that I cannot promise the hon. Lady an urgent statement, but I will draw her remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): As my right hon. Friend knows, we should have been discussing the Electronic Communications Bill this afternoon. We shall now be doing that next week, thanks to the disgraceful behaviour of the lunatic fringe on the Conservative Benches. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government still intend the legislation to be the first Act of the new millennium? If so, can she also assure me that she will deploy all the tools that the Government have at their disposal to ensure that the Bill makes progress next week?

Mrs. Beckett: The Government have every intention of ensuring that the Bill makes progress next week. Hon. Members on both sides of the House recognise that it is important legislation and not party politically controversial. Therefore, we are all entitled to hope that it will reach the statute book in the ordinary way. As to whether it will be the first Act of the millennium, I am afraid that I have not had the opportunity to check.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): May I urge the Leader of the House to have a two-day debate on defence the week after next on the Tuesday and Wednesday, which in the current programme remain fallow? If she does not hold an early debate on defence, the view that is prevalent in the country that the Government are not interested in defence, with our troops living in tents in Kosovo and the Royal Air Force some 20 per cent. short of fighter pilots, will be heightened.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman's last point is particularly extraordinary as it takes more than a couple of years to train a fighter pilot, so, if there is a fighter pilot shortage, the blame cannot be laid at the door of the present Government. *[Interruption.]* It was not us. That is a simple fact.

The hon. Gentleman asks for a two-day debate next week. I cannot undertake to provide time for that next week, although I certainly take on board his remarks. The Government are conscious of the need to find time for the defence debates. It is untrue that there is no interest. Indeed, it is perhaps because rather too much interest was taken in, for example, the defence White Paper that it came in late.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. We must move on.

BILLS PRESENTED

Utilities

Mr. Secretary Byers, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Prescott, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Reid, Mr. Secretary Murphy, Mr. Secretary Darling and Mrs. Helen Liddell, presented a Bill to provide for the establishment and functions of the Gas and Electricity Markets Authority, the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council, the Telecommunications Authority, the Telecommunications Consumer Council, the Water Advisory Panel and the Consumer Council for Water; to amend the legislation regulating the telecommunications, gas, electricity and water industries; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory Notes to be printed [Bill 49].

Analysis of Costs and Benefits (European Union Membership)

Mr. Michael Fabricant presented a Bill to establish a Parliamentary Commission to investigate and report to Parliament on the costs and benefits of the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 21 January, and to be printed [Bill 50].

Points of Order

1.42 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. I wonder whether you, or Madam Speaker, have received any indication from the Prime Minister that he intends to come to the House to make a statement to clear up the confusion following his statement on the health service and its contradiction by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Is it not important that the House should learn whether there is even a semblance of coherence in Government health policy sooner rather than later?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): That is not a point of order. We have had no notification from the Prime Minister.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. About five or six of us have waited 40 minutes to put a business question—in my case, to follow up on vibration white finger, which was raised last week. Why were questions on the business statement cut short?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman knows far better than me that, when we finish a statement and go on to the main business, is at the discretion of the Chair.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Following the news in today's papers of £10 billion-worth of extra burdens on local businesses, I was wondering whether you had received a report that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was to make an emergency statement to the House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have not received such a request.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. May I draw your attention to column 945 in the *Official Report* of 19 January, where your colleague, the Chairman of Ways and Means, ruled that there had been no filibustering during the proceedings and debate? May I also draw your attention to the fact that on "Yesterday in Parliament" this morning, it was asserted as a statement of fact by a BBC correspondent that there had been filibustering? Is that not an intolerable misrepresentation of what happened in the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is certainly not a matter for the Chair. The hon. Gentleman may wish to take it up with the BBC.

Representation of the People Bill (Allocation of Time)

1.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the remaining proceedings on the Representation of the People Bill—

Timetable

1. The remaining proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading of the Bill shall be completed at this day's sitting and shall be brought to a conclusion, if not previously concluded, four hours after the commencement of the proceedings on this Motion.

Questions to be put

2.—(1) For the purpose of bringing proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph 1 the Speaker shall put forthwith the following Questions (but no others)—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(2) On a Motion made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(3) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under sub-paragraph (1)(c) on amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

Miscellaneous

3. Proceedings under paragraph 2 above shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to sittings of the House; and Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

4. If at this day's sitting proceedings on a Motion for the Adjournment of the House would, by virtue of Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration), commence at a time when proceedings on the Bill are in progress, the proceedings on the Motion shall be postponed to the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill.

5. Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to the Bill.

6. No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken or to recommit the Bill; and if a Minister makes any such Motion, the Question on the Motion shall be put forthwith.

7. No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to the Bill except by a Minister of the Crown; and if a Minister makes any such Motion, the Question on the Motion shall be put forthwith.

8. The proceedings on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion one hour after they have been commenced; and Standing Order No. 15(1) shall apply to those proceedings.

9. If at the sitting this day the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the conclusion of the proceedings on this Motion or on the Bill, no notice shall be required of a Motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order.

Yesterday, a handful of Conservative Members delayed parliamentary business on the Representation of the People Bill, not because they really objected to the Bill, but because they wanted to avoid debating the Fur

Farming (Prohibition) Bill. They were reluctant to argue their case on that Bill because their party was divided and the opinions of Conservative Back Benchers were out of touch with those of the country. The Representation of the People Bill was disrupted because of their moral cowardice on another Bill.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I hope that it is a point of order.

Mr. Fabricant: It is a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker—you will know that I do not raise points of order that are out of order. However, is it in order for the Minister to imply that I—who was one of the four hon. Members interested in the issues debated last night—oppose the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill, when I do not? Is that not a gross slander?

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I shall have a point of order one day, but, so far, I have not had one today. I tell the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) that the Minister and other hon. Members will make their speeches in their own way, and that it will be for him to try to rebut the case that they make.

Mr. Gray: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I wish that the hon. Gentleman would not speak while I am on my feet; it is very bad manners. Does he have a point of order? He cannot make a point further to the previous point, because it was not a point of order.

Mr. Gray: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Last night, your colleague, the occupant of the Chair, ruled that no filibustering had occurred. Just now, the Minister said that there had been filibustering, contrary to the ruling of the occupant of the Chair.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I did not hear the Minister say that.

Mr. O'Brien: The intervention by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) demonstrated that he is contradicting some of the other Conservative Members who spoke last night. Conservative Members are going in every direction on the issue. That is the very point that I was making, and that is what they were seeking to disguise from the public.

The truth is that the Representation of the People Bill was disrupted because of Conservative Members' moral cowardice on another Bill. Their behaviour yesterday was an abuse of the House. If we are properly to conduct business, we need a guillotine on the Representation of the People Bill.

As Madam Speaker and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, often make clear, members of the public watch proceedings in the House, and they want parliamentary business conducted with dignity. Yesterday, they saw a handful of Opposition Members making deliberately long-winded, discursive speeches. On no fewer than 19 occasions, the Deputy Speaker had to intervene, calling Opposition Members to order as they wandered through the highways and byways of the debate.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I shall give way shortly.

The Bill has broad parliamentary support, and Conservative Front Benchers agree with most, if not all, of its provisions. I believe that the Government have the support of the House to ensure that the Bill's passage is concluded.

I think that I am able now safely to make one prediction: in the speeches that follow this one, we shall hear much synthetic anger from Conservative Members. Last night, in response to the business statement, in an extraordinary display of hyperbole, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said that a guillotine would

"damage the very fabric of our parliamentary democracy."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 938.]

Let us put aside the histrionics, not to say the hysterics, and consider the facts. The Bill is an agreed Bill, giving effect to the recommendations of a working party that itself was the product of a consensus. I know that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) takes the view that the fact that a Conservative representative was on the working party is of no relevance to him, and it is perhaps a sign of the state of today's Conservative party that he disowns his party so easily.

Mr. Brady: I deeply resent the Minister's implication. Earlier today, the Leader of the House mentioned the debate on the definition of "temporary" unemployment and the short, but very civilised discussions that I had with the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on proposed change to the law. I did not make a speech on the issue, although I could have done, but chose to address it in brief interventions on the Minister. Conservative Members are trying to improve legislation, as it is our duty to do, and I strongly resent the Minister's implication that we were doing anything other than that.

Mr. O'Brien: As we proceed, I shall show how few Opposition Members were prepared to make speeches in debate of what they now claim to be such an important Bill.

The working party's recommendations were published in July, and there has been plenty of time for everyone to consider them. I therefore hope that we shall hear no canards about the Bill being rushed through with indecent haste. It has been the subject of wide consultation and full opportunity for debate.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: This must be the last time.

Mr. Bercow: The Minister is showing signs of not knowing his elbow from his posterior in parliamentary

[Mr. Bercow]

terms. Does he not recognise that, if more right hon. and hon. Members had made speeches, the debate would have been even longer, causing him to complain even more? Will he accept what should be clear beyond peradventure—that many hon. Members regarded features of the Bill as ill-considered, confused and, in some cases, downright stupid? Why does he not grow up and stop impugning the integrity of right hon. and hon. Members?

Mr. O'Brien: The way in which the debate was conducted yesterday was clear for all to see, including members of the public who were watching. At times, very few could be bothered to come to listen to the long, discursive speeches conducted by some Conservative Members. They will know what was going on.

We had a full and constructive Second Reading debate on 30 November last year. The Committee stage began on 15 December, after the regulation interval between stages. We agreed to the Conservatives' request to take the Bill on the Floor of the House because they said that it was a constitutional measure. Constitutional Bills have been guillotined before, regardless of whether this Bill falls into that category. Conservative Members no doubt recall with discomfort the European Communities (Amendment) Bill in 1986, when the Lord President of the Council, Mr. John Biffen, pointed out when moving the guillotine motion that six constitutional Bills had been timetabled since 1966. The Bill is not controversial in the sense of most constitutional Bills, and we have had very few Divisions on it. I also refer Conservative Members to other guillotines that their party imposed on 14 January 1985 and 25 February 1997.

After three days of debate—

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald) *rose—*

Mr. O'Brien: I had said that I would not give way again, but I shall give way to the right hon. Lady—how could I refuse her?

Miss Widdecombe: Does the Minister agree that it is when there is agreement between the parties that Bills should be examined minutely? That is the time when Back Benchers in particular should have an opportunity to give a Bill a close examination. Is that not a good principle?

Mr. O'Brien: The right hon. Lady is being disingenuous. She knows well from her long experience in the House the difference between a proper examination of a Bill and a deliberate attempt to disrupt the proceedings of the House. That is what was going on yesterday.

The Bill is not controversial in the sense of most constitutional Bills. That should be made clear to the public who watch proceedings in the House. For much of the time, only a handful of Conservative Members have bothered to appear. At times, there have been only two Tories in the Chamber. On the second day of consideration in Committee, only two Back Benchers made full and proper speeches. On the third day of consideration in Committee, only four Back Benchers made full speeches. We had three days of debate in Committee to allow for the fullest possible discussion of the Bill. On the second day, the Government suspended the 10 o'clock rule and on the third day—a Thursday—the Government suspended the 7 o'clock rule. On the first two days of consideration in Committee, we did not hear any contributions from the right hon. Members for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) or for Bromley and Chislehurst. I do not believe that they were even in the Chamber on those two days. We shall bear that in mind if either of them decides to make protestations about their deep and abiding interest in the Bill.

I accept that the Report stage came soon after the Committee stage, but the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), from the Opposition Front Bench, said:

"The Opposition do not object to scheduling Report stage for Monday".—[*Official Report*, 12 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 306.]

It was later put back two days to give an extra opportunity for amendments to be tabled. The Opposition clearly did not object to the timetable.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House announced a week ago that all the remaining stages of the Bill were due to be taken yesterday. There was not a single objection or suggestion that that provided inadequate time.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am not disagreeing with what the Minister has said about the timetable, but will he confirm that the Government originally proposed the remaining stages for Monday but, as a result of representations that there should be a longer gap, the timetable was changed by two days, which at least gave us some time between consideration in Committee and the remaining stages? That was far preferable to the original Government plan, which would have been unacceptable to hon. Members on both sides.

Mr. O'Brien: I accept that there was a discussion between the usual channels, and that agreement was reached on the way in which we should proceed—an agreement which was broken by at least some Conservative Back Benchers yesterday.

What we witnessed yesterday was a disgrace. We can get into a semantic discussion about whether we should use the "F" word to describe it, but let us be quite clear. During yesterday's deliberations on this Bill, certain Opposition Members were deliberately wasting time.

Doubtless, an Opposition Member will try to advance the argument that it could not have been a filibuster as the Deputy Speaker would have ruled anything of the kind out of order. The fact that the Deputy Speaker was obliged to intervene on Conservative Members straying out of order on no fewer than 19 occasions speaks for itself. Back Benchers, such as my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who had tabled important amendments and who had regularly attended the Committee, had to listen to a few Tory Members delay, dissemble and dissipate the parliamentary timetable.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is trying to gain a reputation in this Parliament as "the beast of Bromley", but he is a poor substitute for my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), without the wit. I was going to comment on his colleague, the

right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, who normally sits at the right hon. Gentleman's feet, but I will refrain as he is not in the Chamber.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst has had his comeuppance today. The Conservatives have only themselves to blame for this guillotine—or, rather, the handful of Back Benchers who delayed the House's business yesterday. If Opposition Members had had to sit, as I did, and listen to the tedious repetitious rhetoric yesterday, they would have turned their ire in the direction that it belongs—on to their Back-Bench colleagues.

This is an important Bill, and there are still important amendments relating to it to be discussed. It should be possible to deal with all of them in the time that remains. Whether that proves possible will, I suspect, depend on the attitude taken by Opposition Members.

If, as they claim, the Opposition are really interested in this Bill, they will accept the allocation of time motion and let us get on with discussing the Bill. If, on the other hand, they decide to treat us to grandiloquent speeches on the motion before us, their professed interest in this Bill will be exposed as a sham. We shall see.

The Bill will play an important part in modernising our democratic institutions, and it deserves both the support of the House and proper consideration. I invite the House now to ensure that that happens by supporting the motion.

1.57 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The Minister asked us to look at the facts, so let us do so. He says also that the Bill deserves proper consideration, and I believe that it does.

On the first day of the Committee, 15 December 1999, we had a statement by the Leader of the House on millennium compliance and questions on the business statement. That lasted for one hour. On the second day, 12 January, we had a statement on Senator Pinochet and a statement on homosexuality in the armed forces. That meant that we did not start the Committee until 5.17 pm. On the third day, 13 January, we had business questions. Yesterday's Report stage was preceded by a statement on the Patten report and a ten-minute rule Bill, which meant that we did not start until 5.7 pm. That left us with under five hours to discuss Report and Third Reading.

In Committee, important speeches were made by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) on extending the franchise to other Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland citizens residing in the UK—some 850,000 people. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) spoke on lowering the voting age from 18 to 16, and we had an impressive, but lengthy, contribution from the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward), which lasted almost half an hour. There were shorter contributions from the hon. Members for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and for Gedling (Mr. Coaker). The whole debate took one and a half hours.

We had a debate on multiple entry on an amendment tabled by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire, and a similar measure was discussed by the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton). The right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) spoke on overseas voters—a speech that extended into the second day, even though those measures were being dealt with in another Bill. There was a contribution also from the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane). We had a debate on the proof of elector—particularly as the provisions are being extended to the homeless—because, under the Bill as it stands, no is proof necessary.

Another, important, debate took place on whether to shorten the time during which postal votes would be made available, on an amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Battersea with which we had great sympathy. The hon. Gentleman also talked about the exclusion of names from the register and referred specifically to Jill Dando, and the problem of battered wives and their appearance on the register.

The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire tabled an amendment that would have given powers to the electoral registration officer to encourage those who are not on the register to put themselves forward for inclusion, and we had great sympathy with that amendment. We had a lengthy debate on clause 9, with contributions from the hon. Members for North-East Derbyshire and for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound). I suspect that other hon. Members have—as I have—received several letters from charities and commercial organisations that will be affected if clause 9 remained unamended.

The Minister was reassuring on several of the amendments that were tabled in Committee. Indeed, only two votes took place, once when the Liberal Democrats pressed their amendment on lowering the voting age from 18 to 16 and the other on clause 9 and the tick box on the electoral form to signify a wish not to be included on a commercial register.

Last night, the House—certainly at least the Conservatives—were prepared to sit past 10 o'clock to continue the Report stage and Third Reading. We were taken aback by the fact that yesterday's business also included two Second Readings. Several of my hon. Friends have great sympathy with the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill and would have wished for sufficient time to consider it properly.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I was a supporter of the private Member's Bill on fur farming in the previous Session and I was here last night ready to speak on the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. I fully expected to be able to do so, albeit in the early hours of this morning. I had no objection to waiting until that time, but it is surprising that the Government are unable to keep their Back Benchers here after 10 o'clock and persistently fail to move the 10 o'clock motion.

Mr. Evans: I can only concur with my hon. Friend's comments, because several of my colleagues wished to support that Bill. The Minister should talk to his business managers to ensure that the House is never again treated in such a contemptuous fashion, with two Second Readings following the continuation of the Report stage and Third Reading of an important constitutional measure.

We know that the Government want the legislation quickly, but we want it right. This is an important constitutional Bill and many amendments have yet to be discussed. We are being asked to constrain our discussions to three hours and that will not be enough time to do justice to amendments tabled by both Conservative and Labour Members.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend will be privy to information to which others of us do not have access. Is

[Mr. Bercow]

he aware of any pressure from the Government Whips to ensure that the admirable speeches by the hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) and the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) were cut short? If no such attempt was made, is it not a little rich for the Government now to complain that we have made too leisurely progress?

Mr. Evans: I am not aware that the Government Whips put any pressure on the right hon. and hon. Members mentioned by my hon. Friend. Indeed, I believe that the hon. Member for Watford was encouraged to speak at length. As for the right hon. Member for Gorton, it became apparent that the content of his amendment would be covered by another Bill, and he could therefore have concluded his remarks forthwith. I am afraid that a lot of time was wasted discussing that amendment.

The Minister agrees that this is an important constitutional Bill and that it deserves time for proper scrutiny on the Floor of the House. Although there is much agreement among the parties about the thrust of the Bill, that does not mean that there is no need for proper scrutiny. The Bill establishing the Child Support Agency is an example of what can go wrong when there is a lot of consensus about legislation.

The Minister scoffs at our protests that the very fabric of parliamentary democracy is being damaged. Last night's business statement confirmed that that is happening. The Government show total disregard for the House of Commons and for a very important Bill.

2.5 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I shall be brief, as it is hypocritical to argue at great length for the more expeditious use of our time in the House.

I followed last night's debate as closely as I could without actually being in the Chamber throughout and I read *Hansard* very carefully this morning. I was interested to discover that such skilled debaters as the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) seemed to speak at much greater length than usual. They are normally rather succinct—the sign of a good debater—but it may be significant that their skills seemed to fail them.

Why did we get into that difficulty last night? What were the effects? Discussion of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill was postponed, as was discussion of the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill. The latter is an extremely important measure for those of us who represent fishing communities. It is concerned with various schemes of financial assistance. The explanatory notes state that it is designed to ensure that Ministers may

"make various schemes of financial assistance 'for the purposes of reorganising, developing or promoting the sea fish industry or of contributing to the expenses of those engaged in it.'"

That is extremely important.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: I said that I would be brief, and no doubt the right hon. Gentleman will get his chance.

The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) is not present today. I know that there are not many fishermen in Bromley, but Conservative Members who represent fishing communities will have some answering to do. The Conservative party has caused to be postponed the approval of grants to fishing communities of something like £7 million. The availability of that sum could now be in doubt as a result of the delaying tactics last night.

However, it is the Government's business to get their business through. They cannot be allowed to escape scot free of responsibility for last night's extraordinary events. I was amazed when I was told in advance how the Government intended to handle last night's business. I assumed that a new spirit of compromise and consensus had broken out over the new year, and that something had been done to deal with the right hon. Members for Penrith and The Border and for Bromley and Chislehurst. I thought that the millennium spirit must have overtaken them.

I also assumed that the Conservative Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot), had somehow managed to discipline what has become an undisciplined rabble on the Conservative Benches, but the Government must now know that that is not the case. The Conservative party has its own millennium bug, and it was visible on its Back Benches last night.

The Government must take very seriously the fact that Conservative Front-Bench Members are unable to control the party's maverick rebels. The evidence is clear in the *Hansard* report of last night's proceedings. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said:

"I . . . feel in no way bound by a colleague who, unbeknown to me, conspires with the Government in a working party to give this measure a spurious urgency that I do not understand and that has not yet been explained to me."—[*Official Report*, 19 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 876.]

That is a declaration of war—not of war with the Government or with the Liberal Democrat party, but of civil war. The Government must take careful note.

It was interesting that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and the hon. Member for Buckingham seemed to be vying for the honour of making the longest contribution to the debate. Can that have anything to do with the fact that they are both on the award shortlist for the Opposition Member of the year competition? I understand that voting is taking place as I speak. Their contributions last night were electoral statements, and should have been declared as such.

I was interested that the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border, who seemed to be a late entrant into the stakes, even managed to speak about junk mail and wine from Bordeaux Direct. Surely that is not relevant to the Bill.

The Conservative Chief Whip and the shadow Leader of the House were not even present when we were discussing the change in business last night. They have effectively disowned their Back Benchers.

Miss Widdecombe: Where were you?

Mr. Tyler: I was here.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I cannot have the right hon. Lady shouting across at the hon. Gentleman while he is speaking.

Mr. Tyler: I am grateful for your ruling, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am glad that the right hon. Lady is so keen on law and order that at least she listens to you, if not to me.

I believe that the Government should have foreseen the situation. They should recognise that the Conservative party is incapable of uniting behind its Front Bench. They should recognise that Conservative Back-Bench Members are in no way obliged to follow their Front-Bench leader, even when agreement has been reached. In those circumstances, it was, frankly, folly to table the business in an open-ended way and to cause so much trouble.

Miss Widdecombe: Lib-Lab pact.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: No, I am about to sit down.

Miss Widdecombe: He is scared.

Mr. Tyler: I have said on many occasions, both in the Chamber and in the Select Committee on Modernisation, that we believe that agreed programme motions are the way to proceed. I welcome the fact that that has become a regular practice. I do not understand why the Conservative Front Bench, having agreed to the necessity and importance of the Bill, did not then agree to a programme motion.

Miss Widdecombe: We wanted a debate.

Mr. Tyler: Could the Government, or a Conservative Member—or even the right hon. Lady, who seems incapable of keeping her mouth shut when in a sedentary position—explain?

Miss Widdecombe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyler: I shall now give way to the right hon. Lady.

Miss Widdecombe: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. The explanation is very simple. We believe in debate, and we believe in the importance of the Bill. When there is consensus on a Bill, that is precisely when it is most important that it is subject to the scrutiny of the whole House. That is why we wanted it taken on the Floor of the House in the first place, and the Government did not.

Mr. Tyler: It is evident that there is no longer consensus within the Conservative party. That is the problem. There is consensus on the importance of the legislation; there is consensus in the Modernisation Committee that a programme motion is appropriate for this sort of business, so that we can then have an orderly discussion of the issues. The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) has important points to make; he should be able to make them, not be squeezed out by the irrelevance of the contributions of some Conservative Members.

Earlier in the debate on the business of the House, reference was made to the shadow Leader of the Opposition. I think that it was a slip of the tongue; it was a reference not to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), but to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. May I suggest that, in future, the Government seek agreed programme motions with those on the Conservative Front Bench? May I also suggest that they also need a third-party endorsement from the other party behind the Conservative Front Bench if they are to push it through?

2.14 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I wish to avoid being a casualty in other people's battles. The last three groups of amendments stand in my name. The timetable motion is liable to affect my amendments so that they will fall unless there is Conservative co-operation.

If the Minister examines the record, he will see that last Thursday I moved two sets of amendments and I was brief in doing so because I was conscious of the time. We dealt with them rapidly. It would be my intention to deal similarly with these amendments. They refer to relatively minor but important matters in specific areas affecting electoral returning officers, such as their ability to correct clerical errors at the last minute before elections take place. We need an opportunity to debate those issues. I can only appeal to Opposition Members to move speedily through their amendments.

Paragraph 6 of the timetable motion states:

"No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken or to recommit the Bill; and if a Minister makes any such Motion, the Question on the Motion shall be put forthwith."

If there is a lack of progress today, and we do not reach some of the serious amendments at the end, there may be an opportunity for Ministers to take action to see that I am given the chance to debate my amendments.

2.16 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): These are often revealing occasions when, in the heat of the moment, people give things away that they might not otherwise do. There have been a number of such examples in the past few minutes.

First, I must take the Minister to task. He opened by saying that Opposition Members who were not against the Bill turned up to debate it. I have made it very clear, and it was referred to a number of times, that I am against the Bill. It is unnecessary, bad and dangerous but, most of all, it is badly drafted. The fact that it was badly drafted became increasingly apparent as the debate proceeded.

It is worrying that both Ministers and Liberal Democrat Members appear to believe that debate is an unnecessary embarrassment in the House of Commons, and that these matters should be dealt with in some expedited way involving the minimum of embarrassing debate. That may be what is characterised as the modern view of this place, but it is not one that I share.

I am of the old school; I confess that my view of the House has been shaped over many years. I had the privilege to come here in 1983, and I have seen it from the viewpoint of a Government Back Bencher, a Minister and now an Opposition Back Bencher. My view is that this is the place where matters should be dealt with, very often in a slow, deliberative—albeit, I understand, very frustrating—way. I am also still of the view that time is the best and most effective weapon that any Opposition party has. In that, I do not count the Liberal Democrat party, because it is an arm of government, to all intents and purposes. The speech of the hon. Member for North

[Mr. Eric Forth]

Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) illustrates that all too well. I cling to the view that it is incumbent on Members of Parliament, in their different capacities, to make the contribution that they must to scrutiny and, occasionally—yes—to delay the Government. That is partly what was happening yesterday.

Last night, the Government tried to push through three separate pieces of legislation in one sitting. That gives us a clear idea of the Government's mindset. It would be bad enough if they were trying peremptorily to finish off a very important and badly drafted Bill in one sitting. Incidentally, it appears that, to them, a sitting must now finish at 10 o'clock—I shall come back to that in a moment. Had they attempted to do just that, it would have been bad enough—but they then had the effrontery to expect the House to lie down and be trampled on by two Second Readings. The Government know that the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill is controversial; it was opposed by me—and others—when it was a private Member's Bill, and I shall oppose it again when it comes before the House as a Government Bill.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall should not be complaining to us that debate on the Sea Fishing Grants (Charges) Bill was delayed. He should be asking the Government why they tacked that Bill on at the end of the day's business, behind the remaining stages of one Bill and the Second Reading of another. He did not ask them because his party is an arm of government.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The right hon. Gentleman should be fair to my hon. Friend. If he had listened carefully, he would have heard that the Liberal Democrats share his view on this issue. I believe that the other business should not have been down for debate last night after the Representation of the People Bill. If there had been no other business, would the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have wanted to take so much time debating the Representation of the People Bill?

Mr. Forth: The answer, almost certainly, is yes. It is clear from both yesterday's and today's Order Papers that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues have tabled amendments to this bad Bill. We felt that we should do so too. The Bill may have started as a cosy, consensual proposal, and there may well have been a working party of which I knew nothing. No doubt, some agreement was reached, although I am uneasy about that. If it was, so be it. However, the hon. Gentleman, whose respect for the House is almost as great as my own, must agree that the Bill has turned out to have more and more loopholes, to be poorly drafted, and to need more and more corrections, even by the Government.

The Government, although they have tabled amendments to the Bill, have accused us of doing what we should not have done—of having the gall to debate the Bill, the effrontery to table amendments and the impudence to take some time over discussing them. That says more about the Government's attitude to the House and to debate than it does about us.

Mr. Hughes: I do not want the right hon. Gentleman to misrepresent the Liberal Democrats, although I do not think that he or the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) have done so, so I should make it clear that, where a Bill arrives in the Chamber with a degree of cross-party support, it must be scrutinised properly. No one would suggest otherwise. The drafting of such Bills also requires particular attention. I disagree on that point with neither the right hon. Gentleman nor the right hon. Lady.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) has made the same point two or three times, and it must be correct. We are all scarred by the memory of the Children Act 1989, which introduced the Child Support Agency and was hailed as a model of consensus and all-party agreement. We have all suffered for it ever since. Last night's events illustrate beyond peradventure that we should be doubly suspicious of a Bill that comes before the House after a process of cosy consensus. We should have learned the important lesson that such Bills might require even more scrutiny.

I want to say a few words about the magic of 10 o'clock. The modernisers may take the view that the House should complete its proceedings at 10 o'clock and that it is unreasonable to keep more sensitive Members or Members of a particular gender here beyond that time. They are entitled to that view, but I do not see why the House should limit itself in that way. I freely confess that I was moulded by the experience of the Parliaments of 1983-87 and 1987-92, when business was routinely done late into the night.

Mr. Tyler: I did not say, and my colleagues and I will never say, that it is necessary to end the business at 10 o'clock. I apologise if I gave the right hon. Gentleman the wrong impression about that. I served my apprenticeship in the House in the balanced Parliament of 1974, which often sat late into the night. I recall that some of those debates were very valuable. The Liberal Democrats did not say last night that we thought it necessary or desirable to end business at 10 o'clock. We were prepared to stay as long as was necessary.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful for that point, and I exonerate the hon. Gentleman from what I am about to say. The Government want to put the House into a state of mind that suggests that anything that happens after 10 o'clock is unbearable, unnecessary and undeliverable. That is a problem for the Government and the Whips; they should not visit it on us. Yesterday, we were here to do serious business in scrutinising the Government and holding them to account. The fact that they could not bear scrutiny beyond 10 o'clock is their problem, not mine. The concomitant difficulties in their management of business are also their problem.

Mr. Bercow: Is not the performance of Labour Members especially unfortunate? A large number of Labour Members were not outside the Palace of Westminster attending to other duties last night, but were having convivial evenings within the precincts. If it is good enough for them to be here for other—often highly enjoyable—purposes, why is it unreasonable of us to expect them to attend to their legislative duties in the Chamber?

Mr. Forth: I shall hazard a guess that those Members were told by their Whips not to be in the Chamber.

That is another aspect of new, modern government. It seems that Labour Members must not be here to participate in debate. We saw ample evidence of that last night, and similar evidence is before us today. That worries me.

I want the business to proceed properly today. To the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), I should say that I believe that, whether or not the Minister changes the order of business, we shall reach his important amendments. My right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean)—who sends his apologies—and I have tried to withdraw some of our amendments so that today's progress may be better facilitated.

Mr. Barnes: The right hon. Gentleman said yesterday that he would be keen to speak on Third Reading. I hope that he will assist us in reaching that stage as I am among several Members who would like to say a few words then.

Mr. Forth: I shall facilitate that process by sitting down shortly. I rebut all that the Minister has said. I make no apology for playing my role in scrutinising the Bill and in engaging in debate. I hope to continue to do so. The Government's attitude towards the democratic process and accountability is alarming and dangerous.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Government's refusal to go beyond 10 o'clock last night resulted in the remaining stages of the Electronic Communications Bill not being proceeded with today? Does he realise that many people in the e-commerce industry are incredibly concerned about the way in which that Bill has been bumped? A further delay has affected a Bill of great importance.

Mr. Forth: That fact illustrates the Government's peculiar sense of priorities. That important Bill has been sacrificed, even if only for a few days, while we continue to discuss a dangerous and unnecessary Bill that will add nothing to the welfare of the nation or to the security of the electoral process.

I am sorry that we have had to return today to debate the Bill, which we could and should have dealt with last night. This is yet another example of the Government's high-handed arrogance towards the House and the legislative process. I suspect that they are coming to like guillotines and the truncation of debate, because they are finding debates increasingly inconvenient. However, I see no reason why this Bill—no matter how unfortunate and unnecessary the circumstances surrounding it—should not be properly scrutinised, make progress and be dealt with in the way that Bills always should be.

2.28 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Government's behaviour is frankly disgraceful. What has been announced today, and last night by the Leader of the House, amounts to an abrogation of the rights of Members of Parliament legitimately to highlight issues of remaining concern. Let it be placed on the record that, if members of the Liberal Democrat party are not prepared to denounce the Government's conduct, they sacrifice all claim to be a serious party of opposition. It is becoming increasingly clear that the Liberal Democrats are merely a limp-wristed appendage of the Government Front Bench. That may be good enough for them, but it would not be acceptable to Conservative Members.

It is important to understand the rationale behind what happened last night. I am delighted to see the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) returning to the Chamber, because I intend to refer to him.

Mr. Forth: He is another appendage.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend makes that poignant observation from his sedentary position. The hon. Member for North Cornwall cavilled at the conduct of Conservative Members, asserting ludicrously that Front Benchers were in some way out of sync with, and lacking control over, Back-Bench Members. Although I was flattered to be listed in the distinguished company of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), the hon. Gentleman made a simple error in referring to me as a Back-Bench Member who was trying to upstage or contradict Conservative Front Benchers. I know that I am not a well-known figure, but let it be recorded that I am, in fact, a junior member of the Conservative Front-Bench team. I realise that that gives me about the status of the Foreign Minister of the Latvian Republic during the period of occupation, but one must be grateful for small mercies. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition for the responsibilities that he has given me. I am a member of an Opposition Front-Bench team and I want it to be understood that Front-Bench Members of a political party are, first and foremost, Members of Parliament, who have not only a right but arguably a duty—a bounden duty at that—critically to scrutinise the legislation that comes before the House.

I hope that the hon. Member for North Cornwall does not suggest that, because I sit on the Front Bench and participate in Education and Employment questions once a month, that releases me from my responsibility, on behalf of my constituents, to consider the various elements of the Representation of the People Bill. If the hon. Gentleman had been in the Chamber yesterday afternoon, he would have heard me express vigorous support for the stance taken by my hon. Friends the Members for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) and for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). I did not cavil at their stance; I did not contradict them; I did not dispute that their line was right. I said that particular aspects of the Bill—relating to residence, the definition of temporary in the context of periods of absence from residence, weekend voting, pilot schemes and lengths, types and forms of consultation—needed to be thoroughly scrutinised by the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am slightly confused. The hon. Gentleman has owned up to being a member of a Conservative Front-Bench team. Recently, one of his former colleagues, who held a similar position, found himself in some difficulties when he disagreed with the Front-Bench line. For a while, he was uncomfortable on the Conservative Benches; now, he is uncomfortable on the Labour Benches. Does the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) own up to supporting all the views of his party's Front-Bench spokesmen on the Bill,

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

or did I detect a bit of support for the occasionally dissenting views expressed by his colleague, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)?

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is a legendary force for making mischief. He is trying hard, but he will not succeed with me. My vigorous support for my Front-Bench colleagues knows no bounds. I yield to none in my admiration for the parliamentary skills, and the continuing assiduity, of the Conservative shadow home affairs team. I am absolutely with my colleagues. However, I have a duty to look at the detail and to ask questions.

In the context of the outrageous decision to introduce an allocation of time motion, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien)—who is not even bothering to listen to the substance of the debate—should distinguish between adverse comment about a Bill, or clauses in it, and questions about clauses in a Bill and potential amendments to it. In many cases, I asked a series of perfectly reasonable questions about clauses, although very often I received answers that were not perfectly reasonable or—sometimes—no answers at all. Many Members really want to contribute to debate.

I shall unburden myself of an anxiety that I have long harboured, although by doing so in the Chamber I probably guarantee that it will remain a state secret. I find it quite extraordinary that Members of the House spend years and, in some cases, even decades, seeking election to it; but that, having secured election to the House, which is the greatest privilege that any English man or woman—or Welsh man or Northern Irish man or Scots man or, for that matter, Scots woman—can enjoy, they seem peculiarly reluctant to spend any time in the Chamber. Why do the attractions of other parts of the Palace of Westminster exceed the attractions of the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are debating a timetable motion, not the social habits of hon. Members. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would remember that.

Mr. Bercow: I am most grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As always, I comply with your exhortation and guidance.

Mr. Evans: Does my hon. Friend agree that the way in which the business has been changed at short notice means that my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) cannot be in the Chamber, because he is attending the Standing Committee on the Freedom of Information Bill? Furthermore, I cannot attend the Westminster Hall debate on small firms to make an important contribution. The change of business has had many repercussions.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is right. His point shows that we would not have willed the situation. The idea that the matter was deliberately engineered by Conservative Members is nonsense. It results from the actions of a high-handed, imperious, arrogant Government, who are uninterested in, and largely oblivious to, any criticism that might reasonably be expressed of them.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): May I refer the hon. Gentleman back to the remarks he made earlier? I assure him that I am neither limp-wristed nor an appendage to anybody. Will he clarify the motivation of Conservative Members yesterday? I am as much in favour as anybody else of scrutiny by the House. It is part of the role of every Member of Parliament to keep an eye on the Government. Yesterday, Conservative Members gave the Representation of the People Bill an extremely long and slow scrutiny. Was their motivation genuinely to consider the detail of the Bill, or was it to ensure that the Government were forced, because of the timetable that the Government themselves had set, to cancel debate on legislation that appeared on the Order Paper after the Bill?

Mr. Bercow: No. The reason the hon. Gentleman should not contribute on that point is that he was not in the Chamber. The reason why the substance of his argument is wrong is that, during the debate yesterday, I lost count of the number of occasions on which my right hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst and for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) reluctantly gave way, but made it clear that they were anxious to bring their remarks to a conclusion. They made pithy, succinct and eloquent contributions on matters of considerable complexity. It is quite wrong of the hon. Gentleman to cavil at their doing so.

What audacity we have seen from the Government today. How dare Ministers complain about the way in which we delayed debate when it was the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who introduced the subject of the Austrian philosopher, Karl Popper? As he had decided to favour the House with the views of Karl Popper, I had to respond—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members should not go into the detail of what happened yesterday. *[Interruption.]* Order. In this House, we take one day at a time. Yesterday has gone; we are discussing a timetable motion.

Mr. Bercow: I am most grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the Minister will take note. If he had not made his intervention, it would not have been necessary for me to refer to "The Open Society and its Enemies", "Conjectures and Refutations" and the "The Poverty of Historicism" and so on. However, those were legitimate matters in the light of the Minister's remarks yesterday.

We were holding a serious debate. The final proof of my earnestness in debate is that, yesterday, I was celebrating my birthday. The Minister might say, "What a sad anorak; he wants to spend his birthday debating the Report stage of the Representation of the People Bill."

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Bercow: It is true that, later, I was due to meet a friend for a celebration of my birthday. However, I took immensely seriously the important amendments that we had to consider. If Labour Members think that I took part in the debate simply in order to prolong it or to cause the Government inconvenience, when I could have had a thoroughly stimulating evening elsewhere, they are absolutely wrong. There were weaknesses in the Bill.

They needed debate; they required scrutiny and they deserved criticism. That is what Conservative Members offered.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the following provisions shall apply to the remaining proceedings on the Representation of the People Bill—

Timetable

1. The remaining proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading of the Bill shall be completed at this day's sitting and shall be brought to a conclusion, if not previously concluded, four hours after the commencement of the proceedings on this Motion.

Questions to be put

2.—(1) For the purpose of bringing proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph 1 the Speaker shall put forthwith the following Questions (but no others)—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded.

(2) On a Motion made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(3) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under sub-paragraph (1)(c) on amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

Miscellaneous

3. Proceedings under paragraph 2 above shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to sittings of the House; and Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

4. If at this day's sitting proceedings on a Motion for the Adjournment of the House would, by virtue of Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration), commence at a time when proceedings on the Bill are in progress, the proceedings on the Motion shall be postponed to the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill.

5. Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to the Bill.

6. No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken or to recommit the Bill; and if a Minister makes any such Motion, the Question on the Motion shall be put forthwith.

7. No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to the Bill except by a Minister of the Crown; and if a Minister makes any such Motion, the Question on the Motion shall be put forthwith.

8. The proceedings on any Motion made by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion one hour after they have been commenced; and Standing Order No. 15(1) shall apply to those proceedings.

9. If at the sitting this day the House is adjourned, or the sitting is suspended, before the conclusion of the proceedings on this Motion or on the Bill, no notice shall be required of a Motion made at the next sitting by a Minister of the Crown for varying or supplementing the provisions of this Order.

Orders of the Day

Representation of the People Bill

As amended in the Committee, further considered.

Clause 6

NOTIONAL RESIDENCE: DECLARATIONS OF LOCAL CONNECTION

Amendment proposed [19 January]: No. 30, in page 8, line 43, at end insert—

"(5A) Where the declarant falls into the category of person mentioned in subsection 2(c) above, the declaration of local connection must state that the declarant has spent a substantial part of his time (whether during the day or at night) in the parliamentary constituency (or, if the declaration is made for the purpose of local government elections only under the provisions of subsection (6) below, the local government electoral area) during the whole of the period of three months ending on the date of the declaration."—[*Mr. Evans.*]

2.39 pm

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I remind the House that with this we are discussing the following amendments: No. 9, in page 9, line 20, at end insert—

"(10) When an address given in a declaration of local connection is owned or occupied by a person, persons, business or organisation, permission must be obtained from such person, persons, business or organisation for that address to be used in the declaration.".

No. 31, in page 9, line 20, at end insert—

'(10) When a declaration of local connection is received by the registration officer, he shall make enquiries in order to satisfy himself that the declarant falls within the categories of person listed in subsection (2) above, and no declarant shall be entered on the register until the registration officer is so satisfied.".

No. 27, in schedule 1, page 20, line 35, at end insert—

"(5A) It shall be the responsibility of the registration officer to take whatever measures he deems necessary and reasonable to verify a declaration of local connection made under section 7B of this Act.".

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): Yesterday, I was concluding my remarks on the amendments. My objection to amendment No. 9 was that it would require homeless persons, who, for example, wanted to use the address of the shop in whose doorway they normally spent the night, to obtain the shopkeeper's permission before doing so. If the shopkeeper refused permission, the homeless person would be disfranchised. I could see no justification for that. The shopkeeper is not affected by the measure; it is not a claim to a right to use the doorway. Indeed, arguably, the shopkeeper would be consenting to the use of the doorway by permitting the homeless person to sleep there, although I think it would take a good lawyer to argue that. The shopkeeper might be in a worse position if he consented than if he did not.

Amendment No. 31 would impose an unnecessary additional responsibility on electoral registration officers. They would be required to check whether people making a declaration of local connection fell into one of three

[Mr. Mike O'Brien]

categories eligible to register in that way. That should not be too difficult in the case of mental patients and remand prisoners, but it is not clear what the registration officer would be expected to do to satisfy himself that a declarant was homeless.

Moreover, the amendment would move away from the general principle that the registration officer would normally accept registration applications at face value unless and until objections were raised to the inclusion of a particular name on the register or the omission of another name from it. We do not want to make that move.

The same objection applies equally to amendment No. 27. Why should the registration officer be required to take special steps for people registering by a declaration of local connection which he does not have to take for any other electors? Again, he should be expected to accept the information that he is given unless objections are raised.

I invite the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I offer apologies on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway), who is in the Standing Committee on the Freedom of Information Bill. I appreciate that the Minister is torn between two places. I hope that he recognises that we did not divide the House on the allocation of time motion so that we could move on to this debate. Indeed, as I have said before, we had only two Divisions during the entire Committee stage of the Bill.

Last night, the Minister gave a rather petulant response on amendments Nos. 30 and 31, and I suspect that it may have been because of the changed circumstances and the fact that he had suddenly acquired an audience. The Minister missed the point completely, and I hope that he did so deliberately.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that, whatever the size of the audience in the Chamber, there are many people who watch the parliamentary channel and ensure that they keep an eye on what hon. Members in the Chamber are doing, and so they should.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that contribution. Those people would have watched aghast at the Government's antics last night in curtailing discussion of this Bill.

Our amendments are not too onerous. We said last night that we were asking only that people making a declaration of local connection should say that they have had a connection for at least three months. That is not onerous, and it would help to plug some of the holes that unfortunately are appearing in the Bill.

The Minister scoffed at my remarks last night and made a joke about homeless people getting access to the internet so that they could scour the country and make a declaration of local connection in parliamentary constituencies where there was a small majority. The Bill is open to abuse, and although I do not believe that homeless people would do as the Minister suggested, others may make declarations of local connection.

I mentioned the internet because, as the Minister knows, the internet is widely used by groups who want to protest about many things, including the World Trade Organisation meeting in the USA last year. On that occasion, many demonstrators turned up at Euston station, not because they were responding to an advertisement in *The Guardian* or another newspaper, but because they had talked to one another in chat groups and passed information via the internet.

If protest groups want to abuse the Bill, they can use the internet, and groups from all over the country will turn up not just in Euston to protest, as they did last year, but in the seats of certain Members of Parliament. Those protesters will be able to make a declaration of local connection, and there will be no check and no onus of proof on them.

2.45 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Is not my hon. Friend concerned also about the activities of new age travellers? Last week, I visited the gypsy encampment at Middlezoy in Somerset, where over 1,000 people are camped. They could well abuse the provisions of the Bill if they wished to change the outcome of an election in a marginal seat.

Mr. Evans: Indeed, one can envisage people making a protest in just one seat—I believe that a number of new age travellers turned up in Brighton—and, if a general election were called, they could easily decide to move into a particular seat and make a declaration of local connection. They could choose a Minister's seat; for example, in my region they could choose the Home Secretary's constituency of Blackburn.

We are asking not only for a three-month test to demonstrate that someone has a genuine local connection, past and possibly future, but for the electoral registration officer to be obliged to check that connection. I repeat that it is not an onerous duty. The Minister wondered how the ERO would be able to check that. He or a member of his staff would simply have to go to the area where the person has said that he spends most of the night or most of the day—Victoria street has been used as an example when we are discussing homeless people—and check whether the person is staying there.

If the ERO takes those precautions, that will help to prevent the Bill being open to abuse by people who will have in their minds not the extension of democratic rights and the enfranchisement of homeless people but the perversion of democracy by an attempt to unseat Members of Parliament—perhaps even Ministers.

I hope that Ministers will reconsider the amendment when the Bill goes to another place and that the Government will perhaps table their own amendment, which we would consider carefully when the Bill returns here. Meanwhile, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 10

PILOT SCHEMES

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 28, page 12, line 4, at end insert—

'(2A) Where a scheme makes provision for voting to take place on more than one day, any order under subsection (1) above shall include provisions that prohibit the publication of such material as

may be specified that indicates or purports to indicate the way in which two or more persons voting prior to the day of the poll (or, if more than one day is designated as a day of the poll, to the last day so designated) have cast their votes.'.

We return now to the problem of polling. As the Minister has already accepted that the problem exists, I do not intend to dwell on it.

If polling is extended over more than one day, a problem arises with exit polling. Under pilot schemes, a constituency may want to trial the opening of an early box in the town hall. Opening all polling stations would involve prohibitive costs—possibly thousands of pounds—for a constituency. I suspect that there may be an official polling day, but that a box will be opened early in the town hall in one or two places in a constituency, so that people will be able to cast their votes early.

If the early polling were concentrated in just one or two stations, it would be easier for polling organisations to man those areas. I am referring not to polling people as to how they may vote—the predictive element—but as to how they have voted. That means that the poll is more realistic, although we know that that is not always the case. I am happy to say that in the 1992 general election the exit polling was completely wrong.

Exit polls may sway people in their vote. Some will go along with the trend, but if the exit poll shows that one party might gain a large majority, some may be dissuaded from even taking part in the poll. Although such trends and behaviour may disadvantage one party at the moment, that situation will alter in future.

This is not rocket science. Such provisions already exist in other countries. To save time in Committee, I decided not to read out the full list of those countries and I shall not do so now. However, I know that the Minister is aware that the legislation in some countries bans exit polling once voting has already started. In some countries, such polls are banned even in the few days before the election takes place. We are not asking for that. We are merely suggesting that, if voting has begun in the pilot area, polling must not be allowed to take place.

In France, voting takes place over two Sundays. That means that there is no polling for two weeks during general election campaigns. Although such provisions are not part of the legislation in the United States, because of the time-zone problem, appeals are made to people on the east coast not to declare their results before people on the west coast have voted.

The Minister gave us an assurance in Committee. I hope that he will be able to reassure us once again that the matter will be considered carefully when the Bill goes to another place. Perhaps a Government amendment will be tabled. Such an amendment is necessary because local authorities in a pilot would not have the power individually to ban exit polling. The matter needs to be considered here and a provision must appear in the Bill.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): On this occasion, Liberal Democrats will support the official Opposition. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) made it clear that there are several good reasons for the amendment.

I have some experience of what can happen when an exit poll is conducted in a city such as Portsmouth. The newspaper there publishes a lunchtime edition followed by several later editions. An exit poll of early polling between 6 and 8 am could easily be in the public domain by lunchtime. I know for a fact that a newspaper can have a marked impact on elections and it is to the credit of a newspaper that it can engage its readers with such well-informed comment. I, for one, was probably a beneficiary of that when I won a by-election to this place in 1984. Against the official poll odds, I was elected. It was interesting that the lunchtime edition of the newspaper on polling day suggested that I was in a very good position.

I am therefore, conscious that exit polls are a dangerous tool, in the sense that they can influence people during the election process. We shall support the amendment, and I hope that the Minister sees the sense of it and recognises the need for such a provision to appear in this clause and not as part of a schedule.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr. George Howarth): I hope that I can deal with the amendment briefly. As the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) suggested, the Government are sympathetic to it.

As the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) argued, it would be unfortunate if an exit poll were published before the polls had finally closed and, as a result, influenced people's votes. In fact, in some cases, it might encourage people not to vote. If it appeared that a landslide were likely to happen in a constituency or council ward because the exit poll suggested that one candidate was home and dry, people might not bother to vote.

I responded to a similar amendment in Committee and suggested that I was sympathetic to it and would look for an opportunity to address the issues raised then and in this amendment. I am happy to repeat the undertaking: the Home Office is considering how best to address the problem and it will be very tempting to table amendments in another place.

Mr. Gray: I wholeheartedly endorse the points that have been made by hon. Members of all parties. However, I am concerned that such an amendment might affect the legitimate telling operations carried out by all political parties during elections to determine whether their vote has turned out.

Mr. Howarth: I have not as yet seen the Home Office's precise draft of an amendment to be tabled in the other place. However, I think that it would be illegitimate for it to interfere with the workings of political parties. It is legitimate for a political party to gather information for different purposes from voters leaving polling stations if they are willing to provide it. However, in terms of the principle that we are discussing, we would have to distinguish between a political party's making use of exit polls—for want of a better term—to enable it to identify those who have already voted so as not to disturb them further, and its using the information to publish a poll on its behalf. That would be illegitimate.

Complex issues are involved. However, it has suddenly come to me out of the blue that the arrangements that the Home Office intends to make would not affect telling.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Howarth: I will, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that this is the last time that I shall do so. I am about to say something with which he might be rather pleased.

Mr. Bercow: I await with eager anticipation, bated breath and veritable beads of sweat on my brow to hear what the Minister has to say.

Will the Minister confirm that he is not aware of instances—I confess from my experience in Buckingham that I am not aware of them—in which tellers' activities have been used for a partisan advantage by political party? It would be a matter of grave concern if they had. Is it not true that, on the whole, such activities are internalised activities that are conducted for the benefit of the organisation locally, and that there is no evidence of their being used for partisan purposes?

Mr. Howarth: I accept the hon. Gentleman's view entirely. From my experience in the Labour party, I know that the information that is gathered as people exit the polling station is used solely for internal purposes. I am bound to say that such information is not always entirely accurate. On more than one occasion, I have been chased down the path by an irate voter assuring me with such vigour that they have already voted that I am inclined to believe them.

Our intention is to table suitable amendments in the other place to cover precisely the points raised. As I said earlier, we are grateful to the Opposition for raising this important issue. On the basis of the further undertakings that I have given, I hope that the hon. Member for Ribble Valley will feel able to withdraw his amendment.

Mr. Evans: The Minister's response—not only now, but in Committee—shows the usefulness of the Committee stage and the scrutiny that the Bill is receiving.

A polling organisation might publish a poll in a newspaper, on the internet or on television or radio purporting to represent an actual trend because it is based on the response of people who have taken the time and trouble to turn up at polling stations and cast their votes early. That poll may or may not be accurate. We are all aware from our own electoral histories of instances where the polling has been totally accurate and others where it has been totally wrong. Many different polling methods are used, but I am not sure that they are becoming any more accurate.

If a polling organisation gets it wrong, people may decide how to cast their vote on the basis of the information given. That may be false information and it may distort the vote in one way or another. There are therefore powerful reasons to prevent the publication of polling.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) legitimately asked whether, since we do not know how the Bill will be amended in another place, there will be an effect on the traditional telling in which political parties become involved. I have been reassured on that point. Perhaps the Minister will take on board the fact that political parties may decide in their telling also to conduct their own polling. We all know that that goes on. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, it is normally done by releasing spurious canvassing returns. They greatly inflate the support that they receive and are shocked when they come third or fourth when the result of the election is announced—when they find that support on the doorstep was not reflected in the votes in the ballot box.

3 pm

Telling would be allowed to continue, but we should also consider circumstances where early polling takes place and political parties publish leaflets and other literature—or information is made available on radio, television or the internet. It would also be wrong if a political party said, "We have done some early polling of those who voted early and we find that we are now first and everybody else is way behind," or even that the result would be very close when in fact it was not.

Telling must be allowed to continue. When the Home Secretary examines pilot projects, I hope that he will ensure that, in any early voting that takes place, the facility of political parties to tell and to look for personation, for example, will be allowed to continue. It should not be made so difficult that we are not allowed fully to fulfil our functions when the poll is taking place.

With the assurances that the Minister has given us, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On a point of order that is relevant to the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise that I did not make it before the previous debate. I have discussed it with the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth).

On the amendment paper yesterday, there were three selections by Madam Speaker that included amendments that had the support of Conservative Members and Liberal Democrat Members. The names of those who had tabled them appeared above them. In each case, the lead name was either the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst or that of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean). There were other amendments above which only those two names appeared.

When we read the selection paper today, we found that two of the three groups that were withdrawn had the support of both Conservative Members and Liberal Democrat Members. I am not pressing you to make a ruling now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I ask for an indication from you or from Madam Speaker of whether it is in order, as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst tells me that he was led to believe—I accept that—that shared amendments can be withdrawn without the permission of others who were signatories to them? My hon. Friends and I did not know that the amendments would be withdrawn. We had not been asked and we had not agreed that it should happen. We found that amendments with which we would have persisted were not on the amendment paper.

I am not criticising the right hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst or for Penrith and The Border. Clearly, something has gone wrong. One of the amendments was in the group that we have just debated.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The rules make it clear that the Member who has the lead name—in this instance,

the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth)—is entitled to withdraw the amendment at any time before it is before the House. Therefore, it is not a matter for the Chair. It is perhaps a matter of courtesy to get in touch with those who added their signatures to the amendment.

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 29, in page 12, line 4, at end insert—

'(2B) No scheme which makes provision for voting to take place on more than one day and which makes provision for voting to take place on either Saturday or Sunday shall be submitted to or approved by the Secretary of State unless it makes provision for voting to take place on both days.'.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss amendment No.21, in page 12, line 37, at end insert—

'(e) the choice of polling day or days was seen as offensive by religious or other groups; and

(f) the choice of polling day or days led to any prejudice of the votes cast by certain groups.'.

Mr. Evans: I hope that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) will accept that most of the amendments to which he referred were covered by my amendment. However, I understand his point.

The amendment is the result of discussions that have taken place during the passage of the Bill. We believe that polling taking place on a Sunday would be entirely unacceptable to a large group of people if that was the only day on which polling took place. It would be ironic if, in introducing a Bill designed to enfranchise more people and to encourage more people to vote, even a pilot allowing voting on a Sunday led to a number of people feeling unable to vote. That would be completely against the spirit of the proposed legislation. If polling is to be on only one day, let us put it into the Bill, if it is the position, that polling will not take place on a Saturday or a Sunday.

We all know that there will be problems in any event. If we tried two-day polling on a Saturday and a Sunday, it would allow people who for religious reasons have problems about voting on a day when they are involved in religious observance to vote on the other day.

There are other problems with weekends, which the working party discussed. Life styles are changing for many people, who tend to go away, particularly if they have country homes or caravans, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson). They may decide to go away for the entire weekend. People may be deprived of the opportunity to vote, especially if the amendment that we discussed earlier in the name of the hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) about earlier postal votes is not accepted.

In addition, the vote might be distorted. I am not too sure that people with caravans would ever take the opportunity of local declarations of interest if they were away from home with their caravans. With weekend voting, people with second homes could distort the vote. I suspect that similar considerations may apply to students, who are on the register in the area of their university and at home. Some students go on short weekend breaks or go back to see their families. Weekend voting needs to be examined carefully.

The amendment relates specifically to the religious consideration. We ask the Minister to let it be known to local authorities that are thinking of having pilot studies in their areas that it would be entirely unacceptable for that to be on a Saturday or a Sunday. It will be for the Home Office to consider various other days if the pilot study submissions show that people want polls on other days. If there is to be voting on a Saturday and a Sunday, only a true pilot study in various areas will properly tell us what the impact will be and whether there will be an increase in voting. I would be entirely opposed to the change of poll from a Thursday to just a Saturday or just a Sunday. Perhaps the Minister can tell us today whether he has received representations from organisations objecting to the piloting of polling on days other than the two that I have mentioned.

Mr. Hancock: Once again, Liberal Democrats have more than a degree of sympathy for the argument advanced by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). I would support wholeheartedly the idea of moving the poll from a Thursday to a weekend, but I take his point seriously. Many of us represent multi-ethnic communities in which there are people with strong religious convictions who would find it extremely offensive to have voting only on a Sunday. The provision for weekend voting should allow that voting to be on both days. For some religious groups, voting on a Saturday can be as offensive as can voting on Sunday for other groups. There must be a balance. If weekend voting is to take place, it should be tried in a large enough pool of local authorities to allow its effects to be judged properly. It is simply not good enough for one or two authorities to decide that they will try it out. There is a lot to be said for weekend voting.

It was unfortunate—or perhaps fortunate—that I was not here last night. I was attending a meeting of Portsmouth city council—

Mr. Evans: Job sharing.

Mr. Hancock: Yes, job sharing. The democratic process constituted an interesting part of the meeting's deliberations. We were considering whether to have an elected mayor or Cabinet-style government. A frequent question was, "How can we encourage more people to vote?" I do not believe that having an elected mayor or Cabinet-style local government will achieve that. However, spreading the times and days when people can vote would be advantageous to the democratic process.

Many of us are from local government backgrounds, and have witnessed pitiful turnouts at elections. It is obscene that 10 per cent. is not unusual nowadays and that we no longer find an average turnout of 25 per cent. unacceptable in some big cities. We must do something, and the Bill is a major step towards showing that democracy has to be flexible enough to change with the times.

I want to encourage weekend voting, but we must ensure that we do not disadvantage people who feel that those days are significant for their religious beliefs or social activities. Voting must be held on both days of the weekend.

Mr. George Howarth: I want to tackle briefly two of the points that have been made. First, the hon. Member

[Mr. George Howarth]

for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) asked whether we had received any representations about weekend voting. The Home Office has received only one letter, from the Board of Deputies of British Jews, expressing anxiety about voting only on Saturday. That is an unreasonable prospect, especially in areas where there is a concentration of Orthodox Jews, who would find it impossible to vote on a Saturday. The letter also expressed concern about holding an election on the day of a Jewish festival. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will take those matters into account when he considers the applications for pilot schemes, for which the closing date was last Monday. Although my right hon. Friend has not had an opportunity to scrutinise the applications, they will all have been received by now.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) made an equally valid point. He said that as wide a range of areas as possible should be selected for the pilot schemes so that the results would not be skewed by geographical considerations. The Home Secretary and officials aim for a spread of suitable applications so that they can gain a good picture.

I hope that I can be reasonably brief in dealing with the amendments because, as the hon. Member for Ribble Valley pointed out, we have discussed the issues that they raise on Second Reading and in Committee.

We must ensure that we do not harm the interests of those with strong religious views, which would make it difficult for them to vote on a particular day of the week. At the risk of making the eyes of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) glaze over—although I am not sure of the difference between that and his normal expression—I shall mention again the working party that I chaired. I assure hon. Members that the subject that we are considering has been central to our deliberations for a long time, and we do not wish to do anything to the detriment of voters with strong religious views.

3.15 pm

In Committee, I did my best to provide reassurance on the matter. I quoted a Home Office circular, which pointed out that one of the conditions that local authorities will have to fulfil when applying to run a pilot scheme is making a statement that

"'no voter will be put at a disadvantage by the proposed innovation'".—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 489.]

That is unambiguous and would cover those with strong religious views.

On Second Reading, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said:

"If weekend voting ever became part of the national arrangements, we would have to ensure that it took place on both days."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 340, c. 172.]

I also quoted that in Committee on 13 January, at column 501. I know that my right hon. Friend's efforts to provide the House with some reassurance did not fall on deaf ears because the hon. Member for Ribble Valley said on behalf of the Opposition:

"The Minister has given assurances that those of strong religious beliefs will not be disadvantaged by changes in the pilot schemes or anything that follows them. I am reassured by that."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2000; Vol. 342, c. 502.]

Nothing has changed in the few days since then and I hope that, in the light of those reassurances, the hon. Gentleman will understand that the amendment is unnecessary and withdraw it.

Let us consider amendment No. 21. It is a clear requirement of any pilot scheme that it must be properly evaluated. That includes not only considering its cost or effect on turnout, but its impact on voters. Clause 10(7)(b) is designed for precisely that purpose. We would expect a local authority to consider the effect of any innovation not just on the electorate overall but on groups of electors that were likely to be particularly affected by the innovation.

Home Office guidance on evaluation, which has been made available to local authorities, suggested that it should specifically cover the

"acceptability of voting days and times to all faith groups".

I assure hon. Members that my right hon. Friend will not approve any applications that involve a change of voting day when that is not part of the evaluation process.

On the basis of what I have said, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will realise that the amendment is unnecessary. However, it was important to debate it.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for the Minister's assurances and his final comment. It is important to scrutinise the Bill properly and give reasonable time to considering amendments such as Nos. 29 and 21.

I am grateful for the support of Liberal Democrat Members for the amendment. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) talked about the need for a wide enough pool. If the pilot schemes are to be properly evaluated, there must be a range of them, not simply one in the south-east or in the north-west. They must be tested in many regions to enable a proper evaluation.

I also accept the hon. Gentleman's comments about the crisis of democracy, especially in by-elections, where there have been turnouts of 16 per cent. The turnout for one European election was under 10 per cent. That is appalling and I hope that the measure will help to redress that, although I have grave reservations. It will take more than the Bill to achieve that.

The Minister gave reassurances about the regulations that will be established, and said that it would be acceptable for a specific local authority to undertake a pilot on both days of a weekend, but unacceptable for it to move polling from Thursday to Saturday or Sunday. I am grateful for that.

I was interested to learn that the deadline for applications to carry out pilot schemes this year has already passed. I should be grateful for an early indication of the number of applications.

Mr. Howarth: I shall ensure that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien) provides that information as soon as possible.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that. Perhaps an analysis of the sort of schemes that people are suggesting can be provided early so that other local authorities that have not had an opportunity to submit a pilot scheme for this year will have some food for thought. I understand that the pilot schemes can be submitted next year, too.

I seek clarification from the Minister of one further matter. It will be expensive for voting to take place on more than one day, and I know that the Home Secretary will consider carefully the cost of the pilot studies. If a local authority decided to hold two whole days of polling, I assume that that would be extremely expensive.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): My local authority, St. Helens, made an application for a two-day polling pilot and the estimated cost is £5,000, which is not very great.

Mr. Evans: Five thousand pounds—*[Interruption.]* I hear the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham), from a sedentary position, referring to six wards. When local elections are held in parts of local authority areas, they can perhaps be carried out at reasonable cost, but when they involve more than six wards, twice as many personnel are likely to be needed, and at weekends they would have to be paid time and a half or double time. The implications of that must be taken into account.

If a local authority wants to move from polling on a Thursday to polling over two days, as the Home Secretary will not permit voting on only a Saturday or only a Sunday, it can decide to conduct only partial polling on the Saturday and whole polling on the Sunday, or the other way round. In other words, all the polling stations in an area would be open on one day, and fewer would be open on the other day.

We know that, in certain parts of constituencies, there are concentrations of people of certain religious persuasions who would be affected by that. They would not receive the same service as was delivered to others in the constituency. If such people decided that, for religious reasons, they could not vote on the Saturday, they could be disadvantaged by having to vote on the Sunday. They might have to travel greater distances because their local polling station might not be open. They would be told that polling stations were open in certain other areas, or perhaps only one polling station would be open in the town hall.

Mr. Hancock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. If the Minister responds to that point, I hope that he does so with caution. I understand the need to keep costs down, but the possibility that, over a two-day period, ballot boxes would not be available universally in a ward or constituency on one day would be a big mistake, and would leave the local authority or any other body conducting the election open to serious challenge.

Mr. Evans: I am seeking an assurance from the Minister that, if voting is held over two days, it will be universal, and that people will not be offered a second-class service because of their religious convictions. If they had to travel considerable distances to vote, it might put them off voting.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. There is a point which, as far as I am aware, has not been raised in the debate—the integrity of the ballot box which, I assume, will have to be sealed and collected at the end of the first day of voting. Where will the ballot boxes be stored? Who will look after them and ensure that they are not tampered with? Who will make sure that the following morning they are taken back to the same polling station and the same booth? That is a serious issue.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that intervention from the hon. Gentleman. I have observed elections in the United Kingdom, Sri Lanka and the United States, and I have not come across polling taking place on more than one day. In the pilot study, local authorities that want to move from polling on a Thursday will have to hold voting over two days. From what the Minister said, they will not have a choice. The Home Secretary has made it clear that, if voting is to be held over a weekend, it must be held on both Saturday and Sunday. Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are asking that voting should be conducted universally over the two days, if the pilot studies are allowed over a weekend.

I hope that the Minister will take on board the point made by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross). Perhaps he will write to us. If the Home Secretary decides on voting over a Saturday and a Sunday, what will happen to the ballot boxes in the intervening period, so that everyone can be assured that the integrity of the poll will be maintained? It will be difficult for political parties to provide sufficient people to scrutinise the way in which ballot boxes are stored.

Hon. Members in all parts of the House will want to be assured that, if polling takes place over more than one day, full information will be provided to the political parties about where the polling stations will be, the duration of the poll, and the details mentioned by the hon. Member for East Londonderry concerning the integrity of the poll and the personnel involved.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Is it his understanding that, under the Bill as drafted, the Government could contemplate polling over a Saturday and a Sunday, but that, on either of those days, ballot boxes could be only partially available to part of the population?

Mr. Evans: Yes. There is nothing to stop a local authority putting in for a pilot in its area that would involve polling all day on a Saturday but only partially in certain areas on a Sunday, or all day on a Sunday and only partially on a Saturday. There is nothing in the Bill to prevent that, or indeed to prevent a local authority from holding a poll over more than two days, but the cost would be prohibitive, and I know that the Home Secretary will take cost into account.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmonds): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way once again. Will he bear in mind the concerns of those of us who represent rural constituencies? Especially in rural areas where there are predominantly urban borough councils, urban members often dictate policy without regard to the interests of rural constituents. I know that Ministers are in listening mode and I hope that they will have particular regard to the interests of rural constituents, who will be singularly disadvantaged if there is partial voting on a Saturday or Sunday, as my hon. Friend described.

Mr. Evans: I am sure that the Minister will have heard the concerns of my hon. Friend. I share those concerns. I, too, represent a rural constituency, although in some parts

[Mr. Evans]

it is more urban than in others. Problems may arise if a partial poll were conducted on one of the two days. I hope that the Minister will take that on board, and I look forward to his reassurances in writing or written into the Bill when it goes to another place.

Mr. George Howarth *rose—*

Mr. Evans: Does the Minister seek to intervene?

Mr. Howarth: What I am about to say may be longer than an intervention.

Mr. Evans: I seek guidance from the Chair. Must I seek permission to withdraw the amendment after the Minister has spoken?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: After the Minister has spoken, the hon. Gentleman may seek leave to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Howarth: Must I seek leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not necessary. It is the Minister's business.

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful for that guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall deal briefly with the points that have been raised, starting with the point made by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross), through the Opposition Front Bench. The security arrangements for ballot boxes used in early voting will be exactly the same as for those used for postal votes, which are of course received before election day. Electoral administrators are entirely familiar with the procedures for keeping ballot boxes secure and I have every confidence that they can do that in those particular circumstances. When my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary considers a particular application, however, he will have proper regard for not only the cost, as the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said, but the integrity of the ballot. If there were any doubt about whether a particular application could ensure a ballot's integrity, he would not approve the pilot scheme.

3.30 pm

It may be of assistance if I tell hon. Members that, at close of play on Monday, 44 local authorities had made applications, including those of St. Helens, to which my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) referred, and Knowsley—surprise, surprise. Some involve more than one innovation and, if I understood him correctly, that is the case for St. Helens.

Relevant points about voting being spread over two days were made by the hon. Members for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), who referred to religious interests, and for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), who was concerned about people in rural areas. When my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary considers a scheme, he has to decide whether any voter would be disadvantaged and in doing so obviously needs to be mindful of religious interests, the interests of rural and urban areas and so on. In such circumstances, he would find it difficult not to take the interests of rural voters into account, and would not want to disregard them anyway. Hon. Members might not be aware that my constituency has contained a large rural area since the Boundary Commission changes were made for the last general election, so I also have an interest in the matter. I hope that those assurances are helpful.

Mr. Evans: With the leave of the House. I stress once again that, although piloting may take place on one day of a weekend, there should be equality on both days, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) said. With those assurances, I beg to seek leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 11

REVISION OF PROCEDURES IN THE LIGHT OF PILOT SCHEMES

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I beg to move amendment No. 26, in page 13, line 10 leave out clause 11.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 48, in page 13, line 13, leave out

"and on a permanent basis".

No 49, in page 13, leave out line 19.

No. 50, in page 13, leave out lines 20 and 21.

No. 51, in page 13, line 27, leave out

", or (as the case may be) district electoral area,".

No. 53, in page 13, leave out line 44.

No. 54, in page 14, leave out line 1.

No. 55, in page 14, leave out line 4.

No. 56, in page 14, leave out line 6.

No. 34, in page 17, line 4, leave out "11".

No. 35, in page 17, line 7, after "purposes," insert

": except that section 11 shall not come into force before 1 January 2003.".

Mr. Forth: In what I have repeatedly called an unnecessary and bad Bill, the clause is one of the most worrying provisions. Sub-section (1) says:

"If it appears to the Secretary of State, in the light of any report made under section 10"—

such a report would be from a local authority that had conducted one of the pilots we have been discussing—

"on a scheme under that section, that it would be desirable for provision similar to that made by the scheme to apply generally, and on a permanent basis, in relation to relevant elections of any description, he may by order make such provision for and in connection with achieving that result as he considers appropriate"

That bothers me considerably. I am worried in any case, as I have said a number of times, about the way in which we are tampering with long-established electoral law. I am not happy with that approach and shall expand my comments, although not at great length, on Third Reading.

All that would be bad enough, because I do not believe that the case has been made for the provision and sufficient weaknesses and loopholes have emerged in Committee and on Report for us to be even more worried

about the Bill, but the clause allows the Secretary of State, on the basis of the pilot schemes and the reports on them, simply to apply the results

"generally, and on a permanent basis, in relation to relevant elections of any description".

We are going way beyond what is prudent, sensible or wise, dealing as we are with something as sensitive and basic as electoral law.

My amendment would delete the clause altogether and I am advised that the effect would be that the Secretary of State would be obliged to resort to primary legislation widely to apply the results of a pilot. That is what I am after. I am not satisfied that it is sufficient to have an order made, even with the approval of each House of Parliament, which is provided for in subsection (4). As we all know, one of the many problems with that approach is that statutory instruments are not amendable, so we face the prospect of the Secretary of State being enthused by one of these experiments and implementing such a change to the electoral process right across the country, by order. To my mind, that weakness and danger is inherent in such an approach.

It would be one thing if all those matters had been carefully researched, and perhaps the Minister will tell me again about his working party, for which I still have no enthusiasm. He might, however, tell me of the thoroughness with which the working party operated and how it foresaw all those difficulties, saying that it cannot be blamed for all the flaws in the Bill that have emerged. They would be down to the parliamentary draftsman, not the working party.

Did the working party ever envisage that, as a result of the measures that will be put in place by this ill-begotten Bill, a relatively small pilot—implemented, for example, in St. Helens—could attract the attention of the Secretary of State, who might decide that it could be equally implemented in Caithness and Sutherland on the one hand and Cornwall on the other? According to the clause, the Secretary of State could come to the House and say, "By order, I have decided that this scheme is a jolly good idea and the whole country will now have it." Given the rather slender accountability that statutory instruments regrettably provide for us, that could be done. We were criticised for having the gall to scrutinise the Bill, but how much less scrutiny would a statutory instrument provide before the electoral law of the entire country might be changed?

I make a plea. My amendment would have the simple effect of removing the clause from the Bill so that we could all have the reassurance—the guarantee—that, were we ever to face the prospect of changes being made to our electoral law based on the slender evidence of perhaps only one pilot scheme, even if it were to take place in St. Helens, the Secretary of State would have to produce primary legislation, with all that that implies. It would have to go through the full process of scrutiny, unless it were truncated by the Government of the day, and then, and only then, would there be a general change in electoral law.

This is an important part of the Bill and the brevity of my remarks should not be taken as in any way diminishing the importance that I attach to the measure. My point, which I believe is very important, almost makes itself and I hope that the Minister, if he is unable to accept the deletion of the clause, will give us a jolly good story indeed as to what reassurances we shall have that changes will not be made—to our electoral law, no less—on the basis of some slender and rather obscure pilot scheme.

Mr. Hancock: Once again, I find myself agreeing with the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). The amendment makes a lot of sense, and I wonder whether the clause is necessary and what was the motive for including it. Like many Members, I welcome the idea of change and I am sure that we are all delighted that, as we heard from the Minister, 44 local authorities have applied for changes to be made. I hope that there will be a good, countrywide expression of the benefits that can be derived from such changes and that many are agreed to by the Home Office so that they can be implemented fairly quickly.

I must, however, ask Ministers to be cautious. They must not rush to accept the results of one or two pilot schemes. As I am sure most Members on both sides of the House agree, we must see what develops over a period—a minimum of two or three elections—before the Government are able to reflect the success or otherwise of the schemes, and direct the House to decide whether it wishes the nation to be covered by the arrangement involved. Any Secretary of State who rushed into implementation of a scheme—laudable though it might be, and successful in a specific area—and suggested that it would be acceptable in other areas would be making a serious error.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst is right to put caution to the fore. I see no possibility other than the deletion of clause 11. It is not possible to tinker with the clause; it is all or nothing. I should be sorry if the matter were not forced to a Division, because this is a critical part of the Bill, and one that I oppose vehemently.

Ultimately, primary legislation must be the only way of introducing effective change nationwide. I hope that the Minister will see the sense of what is being proposed, and will accept that deleting clause 11 would be a help rather than a hindrance. It would enable other local authorities to chance their arm with a pilot scheme, or an adaption of one of the 44 that are proposed.

I also hope that the Minister will consult his colleagues with the aim of ensuring that the House is given a full report of the reasons for and against acceptance of the pilot schemes that have been submitted. It is interesting to learn that 44 have been submitted, but I should like to know why only 30 have been accepted, and why the others have been refused. Following a debate on legislation such as this, hon. Members are entitled to know the thinking behind decisions to accept or reject pilot schemes.

Mr. William Ross: I entirely agree with what was said by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). We are discussing an important part of the Bill, which I think should have been dealt with by means of primary legislation. I have been in the House long enough to know what "made by statutory instrument"—words that appear in clause 11(4)—means. Many statutory instruments appear on Order Papers. As a member of the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments, I know that hundreds, if not thousands, go through on the nod every year, and that, in some instances, no parliamentary procedure is involved. We should think carefully

[Mr. William Ross]

I can envisage instances in which the only way in which to secure a debate on a statutory instrument in either House would be by means of a Prayer, involving a discussion lasting perhaps an hour and a half. If I am wrong and we would be allowed a day or more, well and good; but statutory instruments are not amendable, and statutory instrument procedure falls very far short of what I consider to be vital, given the sweeping powers possessed by the Home Secretary, whatever the Government involved.

3.45 pm

I am a signatory to amendment No. 26. I added my name to those of Conservative Members independently of them, as is normal procedure. The amendments that I myself tabled are all intended to discover what the consequences would be in some instances, and also to draw attention to the dangers of permanence—especially in the case of amendment No. 48, which asks for the removal of the words

"and on a permanent basis".

Those words would mean that a change made by the Home Secretary would not apply merely to one or two, or even three or four, elections; it would be a permanent change, which could be reversed only by another statutory instrument—and I am not certain that even that would be possible. I suspect that such changes could be reversed only by primary legislation.

I object to the sweeping powers given to a Minister who has been enabled to change the system applying to any election, or to all elections, and to change any existing legislation in order to do that. I do not accept what I consider to be a lame excuse about consultation. I know what "consultation" means: it means that the Government will eventually tell the House what they are going to do and, if they have a large enough majority, force it through. That is not acceptable to me at any time, but it is particularly unacceptable to me in the context of electoral law, which is the basis for the presence of each and every one of us in this place. We depend on an electoral system that the people trust—a system that is above reproach—and we should not be giving such sweeping powers to anyone. The matter should be dealt with in the House, where it should be considered in detail and at length.

The Home Secretary put it very well when he said:

"Electoral law is so fundamental to democracy that changes to it should, wherever possible, proceed by consensus."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 340, c. 160.]

The qualification "wherever possible" negates the rest of the sentence. I am familiar with the concept of making what appears to be a very good statement, and then qualifying it out of existence. It is a favourite tactic of Ministers, and we have suffered much from it in Northern Ireland.

I do not think that we should proceed by consensus "wherever possible"; I think that we should always proceed by consensus. I do not think that any party, or any Member, would object to genuine improvements in the electoral system, and I believe that our proceedings last night and earlier today were not the right way in which to deal with electoral law. Consensus should be demonstrated by an overwhelming majority in Parliament, after long and careful consideration of the consequences. As we know, it is amazing what comes out of the woodwork during the Committee and Report stages of Bills. Often, consequences and dangers are not apparent at first sight. The Bill introduces sweeping changes by the back door.

Amendment No. 49 also expresses my concern about the powers of the Home Secretary, but it proposes the removal of the words

"with respect to the whole of the United Kingdom".

The proposal is universal, proving what I said earlier about the Home Secretary's powers covering each and every election. Amendment No. 50 proposes the removal of the next paragraph—

"if such elections are held only in a particular part of the United Kingdom, with respect to the whole of that part."

No one has yet explained why Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, a region thereof or a particular council area can have a system that is different from the rest. I believe that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. We should try to have a universal system, applied across the board.

On amendment No. 51, it is not immediately apparent, but I believe that the words "district electoral area" can apply only to Northern Ireland; the single transferable vote system of proportional representation is used there. As written in the Bill, a district electoral area is not a whole council area. It is a part of a council area. It is a number of wards. It could be three, four, five, six, seven or eight wards, but it is not the whole council area.

Therefore, a peculiar and sweeping power will be given to the Secretary of State—I assume that it could be the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—to ensure that one particular area of a council can elect people by one system and that another area in the same council can elect people by a different system. That cannot be acceptable.

I know that the Minister will stand up in a few minutes and say that that will not happen, but, under the legislation, it could. My experience is that, if something nasty can be done in Northern Ireland, it generally will be. Therefore, I am concerned about the measure.

We need to look at the clause's direct consequences in relation to the STV system. By-elections occasionally take place. Under STV, three, four or five council members could be elected, with votes tumbling from one to the other in order of preference, or allegedly so. It is a fairly mathematical job to work it out. Calculators must be used to get it done.

I remember losing a very good councillor because, at one point, he was two fifths of a vote short of getting to the next stage. It is remarkable. People do not lose by one vote in Northern Ireland; they lose by a fraction of a vote. It was interesting that he lost. Eventually, we got someone whom we did not like because many of the votes did not transfer the next time round. The consequences are unforeseen. We can never know what will happen as the votes tumble down the chute.

Whenever we come to a by-election, that is not what happens. We transfer the votes only until someone has one over the half; it is not even 51 per cent. It is a modified system of first past the post, or first past the 50 per cent. barrier. Therefore, we need to be careful about what will happen if some fancy scheme is introduced for by-elections in Northern Ireland, rather than for PR elections for a council area, for councils in

the whole of Northern Ireland, for the Assembly, or even for Europe. That part of the Bill raises a number of interesting and important questions for Northern Ireland.

Amendment No. 53 aims to leave out parliamentary elections—those to this place—from the list of relevant elections. Again, the measure raises questions. The other elections that I aim to leave out are in whole or in part to do with Northern Ireland. They include elections to the European Parliament, where, again, the STV system is used in Northern Ireland, and elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

We are being told once more that changes can be made to the system of electing European Members in Northern Ireland by passing a simple Order in Council through the House. We can go back to first past the post. We can have some sort of list system. God knows what we might have.

At present, we have the STV system, which I object to anyway because it is different in every respect from the system that is used on this side of the Irish sea. Again, for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, we have STV, with six Members per parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland. Again, one system could be used in one part of Northern Ireland and another in another. Anything could be introduced that we would not wish to be foisted on us. My amendment would also leave out local elections in Northern Ireland, which I have already discussed.

I say it yet again: I firmly believe that such changes, either for the whole of the UK or any part thereof, should not be made by order. They should made in Northern Ireland only where a clear majority of the Members representing the Province in this place are in favour of them, and only by primary legislation. It is fundamental to our democracy that we have an honest system of election. I do not want it to be undermined by fancy footwork and misrepresentation of the will of the people.

Mr. Evans: Much has been said about consensus on the general thrust of the Bill. Yes, there is much consensus, but there is much concern as well over clause 11 and the sweeping powers that will be transferred to the Home Secretary.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) ably moved amendment No. 26, for which I have enormous sympathy.

Mr. Ross: Is the hon. Gentleman certain that it is only the Home Secretary? Surely it is only the Home Secretary with regard to Great Britain, although powers may be devolved powers to the Secretary of State for Scotland and to the Secretary of State for Wales. However, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has power over electoral matters there.

Mr. Evans: The Bill certainly transfers powers to the Home Secretary to take wide-ranging powers once pilots have taken place. The Home Secretary can then extend schemes to a number of other elections. I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about other Ministers being able to utilise power. The Minister may say something about that in his winding-up speech.

I have enormous sympathy for the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst. We know what happens in relation to statutory instruments in the House. We have talked a lot about scrutiny of the Bill on the Floor of the House but, when a power is transferred to the Home Secretary and a statutory instrument is introduced, the scrutiny and amount of publicity that are given to the statutory instrument are not the same.

Mr. Bermingham: Does the hon. Gentleman mean that, if, for example, we have a maverick Home Secretary in 2015 who suddenly decides that he or she wants a particular voting system following an experiment in East Kilbride or somewhere else, the publicity generated against such a maverick scheme will not be mighty enough to ensure that there will be no chance of that silly statutory instrument getting through?

Mr. Evans: No doubt even in St. Helens there will be publicity along those lines if there is a maverick scheme from a maverick Home Secretary, but who is to say that it will not, on the face of it, be a maverick scheme, but a well-thought-out and calculated scheme? It may come from a Home Secretary not from the hon. Gentleman's party, but from some other party, which the House would reject if it were given the opportunity of a full debate.

We are talking about scrutiny of an important constitutional area. That is why I believe that we need to get it absolutely right and why we have tabled amendments Nos. 34 and 35. The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) spoke about the need for proper evaluation of any of the pilot schemes. That is what Conservative Members will be carefully looking for.

4 pm

The Opposition are still uncertain about when the pilots will be fully evaluated. The Minister said today that 44 pilot schemes have been submitted to the Home Secretary. The Home Secretary, his officials—perhaps even the Minister, particularly after the good work that he did on his own working party—will have to examine those schemes before deciding which ones to allow. After the announcement on the successful schemes, we should like to hear the Home Secretary's reasons for refusing the other schemes, so that the Opposition and local authorities may see the reasoning behind the Home Secretary's decisions.

We tabled amendment No. 35 to extend the time available for reflection on the pilots at least beyond the next general election, and specified the date of January 2003. We believe that, if the amendment is accepted, the pilots conducted this year and in 2001 could be properly considered. To date—while the Bill is still being considered by Parliament—44 schemes have been proposed. After the Bill is passed, there will be even more publicity about pilots. Once the pilots are up and running—the hon. Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) said that one will be conducted in his area, covering six of his wards—

Mr. Bermingham: Four.

Mr. Evans: Nevertheless, six wards will be covered, at a cost of £5,000.

Once we start deviating from traditional Thursday voting, there will be much publicity and interest in how those polls fare. Consequently, I believe that, next year, the Home Secretary will be confronted with proposals on far more than 44 schemes. If people believe that the May 2000 pilot schemes are successful, and that they may be

[Mr. Evans]

implemented at reasonable cost without imposing prohibitive costs on local ratepayers, other local authorities will want to participate, following in the footsteps of local authorities that have already conducted trials.

As the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) said, the pilots should be nationwide. The Home Secretary may approve some schemes for trial in only one part the United Kingdom, and—for a variety of reasons, such as the nature and stability of the constituency, and regardless of the new rolling registers—those schemes may be a total success. However, it does not follow that, simply because a scheme is successful in one part of the country, it will be adopted, fully embraced and enjoy equal success in another part of the country.

Many commercial firms conduct trials of products in one part of the country before launching them nationwide, as they want to know how the product might do nationally before incurring the expense of a nationwide launch. Similarly, before the Home Secretary issues his evaluation of the schemes, the Government will be conducting trials. In some parliamentary and European elections, the Home Secretary may wish to adopt schemes for use across the country. Once a statutory instrument to that effect has been passed, it will be the first time that some areas have deviated from traditional Thursday voting in that type of election. We shall have to examine the results of those elections very carefully.

The most recent nationwide trial in the United Kingdom was conducted in the previous European elections—when we adopted d'Hondt and regional lists, and when voter turnout, at just over 23 per cent., was derisory. I assume that the Home Secretary, upon examining those results, will have reached the same conclusion that I have—that the public did not embrace the regional list system, and that they perhaps did not like even the regions themselves. In the north-west, millions of people have 10 Members of the European Parliament, from various political parties, and do not know which one to go to. The constituency link has been broken, and many people may not even know the name of their MEP. People have conducted their own trial of the new voting system, and—as the turnout figures show—they do not like it.

We propose that, for the schemes that the Home Secretary is being asked to approve, before he uses the powers conferred on him by the Bill, in some cases there should be one full year of consideration, and in others there should be at least two years. We are asking for extensive consideration, and not only because of the costs involved. The figure of £5,000 was mentioned to implement a scheme in six wards, but that is only one small example. The costs of weekend voting will be even greater. If voting were done on only one weekend day—the Minister has assured us that that will not happen—people will have to be paid at time and a half. If there is voting on Sundays, people may have to be paid at double time, imposing enormous cost.

If the Home Secretary, after considering the results of a local pilot scheme, decides that general elections should be held on weekends, and if he makes it obligatory in a statutory instrument, enormous costs will be imposed on local authorities across the country. I am not aware of any assistance to local authorities to meet that extra cost. Currently, local authorities volunteer to spend ratepayers' money to conduct trials of new schemes. They will not be able to volunteer to comply with a statutory instrument, but will have to find the money to do so from within their own budgets. Subsequently, other spending will have to be cut, or council tax will have to rise.

We still do not know how many of the 44 schemes will be accepted, and it will be interesting to see how many are. There may not be many pilots in 2000. Regardless of the number, we shall at least be putting a toe in the water.

It will require at least a full year before we are able to determine whether a pilot has caused the vote in local elections to increase or decrease. Although we know from published figures that there has been a decline in polling numbers, particularly at local elections, we do not know what turnout criteria the Home Secretary will use to judge the success of the pilots conducted this year and next year.

How will the Home Secretary judge whether the decline in turnout has been arrested? Even if the numbers decline is stopped, how will he determine whether it has been stopped by the pilot, or whether the pilot has prevented the decline from being more severe? We do not know how he will make those determinations.

Mr. Bermingham: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that another problem is that, next May, only a third of metropolitan areas will be polling, and that shire counties, London and district councils will not be polling? The experiment will be conducted only in certain areas.

Mr. Hancock: Some districts are polling.

Mr. Bermingham: Yes; I am grateful for that intervention. The results of the experiment will not be nationwide, and we should perhaps be cautious in considering them.

Mr. Evans: I agree completely. There are 44 pilots, but we do not know how many of them will be accepted. This year and next year, there will be only limited pilots in the United Kingdom. Local elections will not be held simultaneously across the United Kingdom for three years. The Home Secretary, using the powers that we confer on him in clause 11, may decide to use those elections to conduct a trial of a new voting scheme for the entire United Kingdom, prior to changing the system used for Westminster parliamentary elections.

Mr. Bermingham: The hon. Gentleman's fears may be unfounded, because the votes will be counted under a first-past-the-post system, so the trials will not necessarily change the overall strategy of voting. Clause 11 does not give the Home Secretary the power to introduce proportional representation.

Mr. Evans: I agree. Proportional representation was not considered by the working group. If any local authority proposed a pilot scheme that included the use of proportional representation, the Home Secretary's bin would not be far away. The Bill does not give him the power to agree to such a pilot anyway, but it gives him power in other areas. That is why I am anxious that we should get the trials right this year and next. As we suggest in amendment No. 35, there should be a longer period of evaluation before the Home Secretary is able to introduce a new system nationwide for local or Westminster parliamentary elections.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) mentioned the integrity of the vote. If polling takes place on more than one day, people will need to ensure that there is great security. If there are any errors, future pilots could be jeopardised. One local authority failing to take proper precautions could result in a good idea not being developed in other areas. We have also asked whether the ability of the political parties to cope with voting taking place on a different day or on a number of days could be taken into account in the evaluation. We are all part of the system. Candidates, canvassers and tellers all have a role to play in the election procedure. Not everybody is entirely happy with the telling arrangements.

I am sure that we have all encountered voters at polling stations who refuse to give us their number, because they feel that that would give us more information than just the fact that they had gone to vote. They do not fully appreciate the fact that we take numbers to ensure that we do not waste their time—never mind ours—later in the day when we knock on doors or phone people to encourage them to vote. I hope that giving extra time for the evaluation procedure will enable us to consider the ability of the political parties to participate in the changed voting arrangements.

The Home Secretary will also be given powers to introduce voting a lot earlier than polling day. Early voting may be permitted on a number of days, with the polling booths open for more than just two days. I read one suggestion about mobile polling, with ballot boxes being taken to a place of work, a residential home, a nursing home or even a small village with only two or three houses where the people are disadvantaged by having to travel a long way to vote. For example, there is the case of Paralchina in Australia, which is miles from anywhere. The ballot box is taken to the villagers. The authorities ensure that everybody votes by going to them. The villagers all know when the ballot box is coming, because it is one of the most exciting things that happens in Paralchina, apart from the train going in and out.

Some villages in this country might benefit from mobile polling, but we need to see how the idea will work. We shall want to be privy to such an experiment and to ensure the integrity of polling boxes that move around the country. The hon. Member for East Londonderry said that, in Northern Ireland, if bad things can happen, they will. Mobile polling boxes travelling round the country could present an opportunity for fraudulent voting if we are not careful.

4.15 pm

The possibility of voting in supermarkets has also been mentioned. The Home Secretary may well find from pilots that it works. Some hon. Members said in Committee that the last thing that people out shopping wanted to do was go and vote, but shopping centres and big supermarkets attract many people. It is worth giving local authorities the opportunity to set up a mobile polling station in a supermarket car park to see what the response is. Some families like to vote together and wait until the entire family is home before going to the polling station, but for others that is not possible and they might want to vote while they are out at the supermarket.

Not everybody voting at a supermarket would necessarily live in the local polling area. They might come from another part of the town or city to go shopping and then pop into the polling station. We have to evaluate the idea properly because, without proper proof of identity—we appear to have decided against requiring that—people can assume a false identity and be crossed off the list at the supermarket but not off the other list at the polling station, perhaps a few miles away, where the real voter could then vote as well. If all the polling stations were linked by computer, there would be less of a problem, but having polling in a supermarket as well as at the local polling station gives greater opportunity for personation.

We need proper safeguards and better evaluation of the dangers of personation. We have already agreed that scant research is being done on that. I have heard of people at polling stations being told that they have already voted and other hon. Members may know similar examples. Without more research on personation, how can we properly evaluate whether a pilot is successful on that count if we do not know the base line?

Mr. William Ross: There is another aspect of that issue. At a parliamentary election, people voting at the supermarket may not even know who their local candidates are. How can we determine which constituency they live in and how will the information be conveyed from one constituency to another? In most of the elections that I have fought, a few ballot papers have turned up from other constituencies. God knows how they got there. I assume that they were postal votes that went astray in some way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are in danger of going into too much detail about individual schemes rather than talking about the amendments.

Mr. Evans: I am coming towards the end of my contribution. I want to ensure that the Home Secretary has enough time to evaluate the great number of pilot schemes. We all know about the problem with supermarket voting that the hon. Member for East Londonderry referred to. I hold a surgery at a supermarket when shoppers can come and chat with me about whatever their problems are. I know that other Members of Parliament do the same. When I ask where they live, I sometimes find that they are from outside my constituency. I then advise them to see their Member of Parliament. The catchment area of a supermarket may cover more than one constituency. It would be more expensive and time consuming, but polling stations at supermarkets that cover more than one constituency might need to make provision for voters from neighbouring constituencies. I should be interested to hear from the Minister whether that can be done.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I repeat that the hon. Gentleman is going into too much detail about individual schemes. The debate is time limited and we want to make best use of the valuable time available.

Mr. Evans: I hope that the Minister will take on board the date that we have suggested. We want the pilots to take place, but they need to be properly evaluated. The pilots will be limited this year and next. It would be dangerous for the Home Secretary to be confident of his conclusions after a few brief experiments. We would need further evaluation before extending the experiment countrywide, perhaps against the wishes of some local authorities. I hope that the Minister will reassure us.

Mr. Bermingham: As to the security of the boxes on a two-day vote, the answer is simple. At present, when a count takes place not immediately, but the next day—as happens in a number of constituencies at a general election—the boxes containing the voting lists are sealed. Verification takes place the next day, and there is never a problem. At the end of the first day's polling in a two-day vote, one would seal the lids of the boxes for that day and verify them. The next day would be verified also, with a separate box. There does not seem to be a problem in that respect.

I am keen that these experiments be looked at carefully, and I am equally keen that the bid made by my local authority—which covers my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, North (Mr. Watts)—be accepted. However, that is a matter for the Home Secretary in due course.

In St. Helens, voting in some central areas has decreased. In local authority elections, we get a turnout of 20 per cent., and in the European elections we were down to 14 per cent. That is never satisfactory for whoever wins. We must hope that we can stimulate interest again, so that turnouts for local and national elections are about 70 per cent. At the last election, the turnout in my seat was about 65 per cent. The reason for the drop is the nature of the area, and the nature of the problems that we have. The experiments are therefore a good idea.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to think about clause 11 as it is drafted and the conclusions that are to be drawn. I would like to see experiments and evaluation in different areas, as different factors affect different areas and the voting intentions there.

The experiments should be carried out over, perhaps, three or four local government elections—the best place to test these matters. Then we can look at whether double-day voting, single-day voting on a different day or no change is the answer. I understand the purpose of the amendment, but it would be short-sighted.

It would be better for the Minister to leave clause 11 as, in the long term, it is probably the answer. As Governments come and go, legislation can change. Just as with statutory instruments, everything on the electoral system is scrutinised. My experience here over more than a decade and a half has taught me that certain statutory instruments are never overlooked and are debated at some length.

The experiments should be over a number of years and different local government elections—including county, district and metropolitan. Elections in the City of London could be used. There are one or two experiments that I would like there, so that we could get some democracy. Before you call me to order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will go no further down that line, and I will make my points in respect of the City at the appropriate time.

I urge the Minister to show breadth of vision and experimentation, and then draw his conclusions.

Mr. George Howarth: My hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South (Mr. Bermingham) must be thinking of some other Ministers when he calls on me to show breadth of vision. I am more of a nuts-and-bolts man. Nevertheless, I will bear his strictures in mind.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) talked about different electoral arrangements applying in different parts of the same local authority. However, under clause 11, whole local authority areas could be excluded, but not particular parts of a local authority. I hope that that provides the hon. Gentleman with some reassurance.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) referred to supermarkets, a matter we discussed in Committee. No pilot would be approved unless it included arrangements to make sure that the register was networked. If someone votes in a supermarket, that vote will be registered immediately by the electronic equipment and deleted from the register. Hopefully, that would prevent the kind of abuse that the hon. Gentleman fears.

Mr. Hancock: Would that be an essential condition of any pilot scheme incorporating voting in a supermarket?

Mr. Howarth: Unless the application for a pilot scheme could demonstrate that it was capable of that—I do not want to be prescriptive as to how—the Home Secretary would have no choice but to turn it down, simply because it would not meet any practical test in terms of someone voting more than once. It is a fair point, but it is covered.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley referred to the cost of the roll-out of any pilot schemes. That cost will fall on the local authorities themselves. My hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South indicated what he takes to be the cost in St. Helens. At this stage, I do not have enough information to say what the typical cost would be. I suspect that the costs will not be unduly prohibitive—indeed, no local authority would submit a pilot application if it felt that the costs involved were prohibitive.

The costs of general and European parliamentary elections are met out of the Consolidated Fund. If there were to be further developments, they would be costed in that way.

I intend to say a word in a moment about publishing the evaluations, but it would be unnecessary and heavy-handed if either the Home Office or the House tried to impose some particular methodology on them. The expectation is that local authorities will carry the evaluations out in as vigorous, objective and professional a manner as we would all expect. I have no reason to believe that that will not be the case.

Amendment No. 26, moved by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), would have the effect of removing clause 11 from the Bill. However, the clause is crucial to the Bill, as it will enable successful innovations to be rolled out. I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman has concerns about this measure, and I suspect that those concerns have increased, rather than decreased. There is not a great deal that I can do about that—it is in the nature of debate that some people will remain to be convinced. However, I share his concerns in this respect—the desire to see that the rights of this House and Parliament are upheld. However, his fears are misplaced and I shall explain why. Clause 10 will allow local authorities to apply to run pilot schemes at particular local elections. All those pilot schemes will have to be fully evaluated and a copy of the evaluation report must be sent to the Secretary of State within three months of the election concerned. That is a reasonable length of time for the sort of evaluation that we would all expect to see carried out.

4.30 pm

I am happy to assure the House that all such evaluation reports will be published and that copies of the reports will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses, so that the process will be open and transparent. It will be open to any Member to read the evaluation of any pilot, and I am sure that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will pore over them with great thoroughness.

Let us consider what would happen if a particular innovation were to prove a great success. Perhaps it had been tried in several local authorities with varying demographic complexions. Turnouts had increased and the evaluations had shown that the electorate welcomed the innovation. In such cases, why would we not wish to apply the innovation more widely and as quickly as possible? If the amendments were to be accepted, the innovation could not be applied until well into the next Parliament, no matter how successful the pilot scheme or how successful the innovation.

I suspect that the electorate would find it hard to understand why some successfully piloted procedures could not apply to them the next time they went to the polling station. Indeed, as a Member of Parliament, let alone as a Minister, I would not like to have to explain to the electorate that, although better procedures had been proved successful in pilots, they had to wait for Parliament to re-examine the issue and to decide whether the innovations should be applied more widely through primary legislation.

Mr. Hancock: Is the Minister saying that pilots can be tried for one election only? Is there any reason why a scheme successfully piloted by a local authority in May this year could not be repeated in May next year?

Mr. Howarth: No, but a separate application would have to be made for a separate pilot. If pilots are successful, they may spread. For example, let us suppose a pilot in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St. Helens, South proved to be successful—knowing the local authority, I am sure that it would. If that happened, and given the symbiotic relationship that I know exists between Knowsley and St. Helens—I live close to the border of my hon. Friend's constituency—the people of Knowsley would ask why they could not have the system, too. My hon. Friend is well aware that political events in St. Helens tend to find echoes in Knowsley, and vice versa.

If amendment No. 26 were accepted, we could not roll out any change except by introducing further primary legislation. As the House knows, the demands for legislative slots always exceed the amount of parliamentary time available. Who knows when my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary might be able to secure a slot for the necessary legislation?

Mr. Forth: Good.

Mr. Howarth: Somehow I knew the right hon. Gentleman would find that an attractive proposition, but the rest of us—including, possibly, the right hon. Gentleman's Front-Bench colleagues—might not. It is our hope that we will have a steady stream of pilots over the next few years and it is quite possible that each year one or more innovations will emerge that are successful. As the House knows, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is a good-natured and patient person, but I imagine if the Home Secretary were to say to her, "It is possible that I will need slots for one or more electoral procedures Bills for each of the next few Sessions," she might respond with a few choice words.

Mr. William Ross: The Minister mentioned the need for a slot for primary legislation, but the Bill provides that, if a prayer is signed by the Leader of the Opposition and a considerable proportion of his right hon. and hon. Friends, the Leader of the House would have to find a one and a half hour slot—and there could be a lot of those.

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Gentleman, as ever, has anticipated me. As I was saying, it would be difficult to justify to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House the need for regular electoral process Bills.

The notion of pilot schemes came from the working party on electoral procedures and, at the risk of incurring the ire of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, I shall quote its final report:

"Any legislation should in our view be framed to allow successful pilots to be rolled out widely without the need for further primary legislation."

Although that places no obligation on the right hon. Gentleman, even he will appreciate that it places an obligation on me to ensure that the legislation envisaged by the working party—which included representatives of the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives—reaches the statute book. We have followed that recommendation closely in framing the Bill. No member of the working party dissented from it, and I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will find himself able, in his generous way, to withdraw his amendment.

I also hope that the hon. Member for East Londonderry has taken some comfort from my remarks. His amendments were designed to prevent any roll-out of successful innovations from applying to Northern Ireland. I understand the source of his concerns, because we have discussed it many times before, and I know that they are based on experience of the possible difficulties of ensuring the integrity of the ballot. However, even allowing for the difficulties that we know exist in Northern Ireland, that approach is perhaps excessively negative. There may be innovations that we have not even thought of that prove to be a great success and from which the people of Northern Ireland would wish to benefit. I cannot rule out that possibility. I know that the problems of turnout mentioned by the hon. Member for Ribble Valley and others are not of the same magnitude in Northern Ireland, but anything that makes voting easier and more convenient should not be ruled out, even though we do not yet know the precise form that it will take.

I have already explained that all the information on which to decide whether an innovation should be rolled out will be made freely available to the House, and that Parliament will have every opportunity to discuss the merits of any proposed roll-out. That seems a much more sensible way to proceed than simply to seek a blanket exclusion from the process for Northern Ireland.

On the basis that something may turn up, as Mr. Micawber put it, for Northern Ireland, I hope that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst will feel able to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Forth: The temptation in circumstances such as these is to respond to an argument on the basis that one

[Mr. Forth]

likes and trusts the people who have made it. Because they have been charming, one is inclined to feel that a measure is safe in their hands. I am tempted in that way today because of the way in which the Minister has put the argument.

The problem is that neither the Minister nor the Home Secretary, whom we all admire so much, will not be in their posts for the rest of time. It is possible that people will be appointed who, under clause 11, will be empowered to take a different view and act in a less trustworthy way. I accept what the Minister has said on behalf of the Government and, on balance, it would be appropriate for me to withdraw the amendment. However, I hope that the House of Lords will look again at this and other matters.

The irony is that, as long as the House of Lords remains unelected—a fact that I consider unfortunate—we will be asking unelected people to consider a Bill that bears directly on our electoral process. However, I hope that their Lordships will take a view closer to mine than to the Minister's.

I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 1

REGISTRATION: AMENDMENTS OF THE 1983 ACT

Mr. Evans: I beg to move amendment No. 33, in page 19, leave out lines 45 to 50 and insert—

"(7) Each registration officer may, as he thinks fit, conduct an enquiry or canvass in relation to part or all of an electoral register at any time, notwithstanding sub-section (1) of this section.".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 32, in page 19, line 50, at end insert—

"(8) Each registration officer shall each month, or seven days before any poll, contact all registrars of births, deaths and marriages covering the area for which he is responsible, in order to ascertain the names and addresses of those persons deceased within the previous month, and shall remove such deceased persons from the register within three working days of ascertaining this information.".

Mr. Evans: I shall be brief, as the amendments are self-explanatory and I want the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who attended every day of our deliberations in Committee, to be able to move his amendments. Time will also be needed for Third Reading.

The amendments would ensure that the electoral registration officer is encouraged to keep the rolling register as up to date as possible. It would empower him to make regular canvasses of inquiries for all or part of the register, as he saw fit. It would also encourage him to collaborate with all registrars of births, marriages and deaths in the area to ensure that the register is kept up to date.

Some hon. Members will know of a film called "Dead Man Walking", but the amendment is designed to avoid a sequel that might be called "Dead Man Voting". That happens at general and local elections, but the amendment would mean that the names of people who die are taken off the register, so that other people cannot use those names to vote.

Mr. Barnes: I do not want to filibuster my own time, but I shall speak very briefly to these amendments.

Canvassing activity is very important. In Northern Ireland, complete canvasses are conducted when electoral registers are compiled. That does not happen elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and the Northern Ireland lesson is one from which we could all learn.

Amendment No. 32 proposes collaborating with the registrars of births, deaths and marriages to remove the names of dead people from electoral registers. That is an important matter. Widows and widowers should not be bothered by polling cards and election addresses for their dead spouses, or by people knocking on their doors to find out why those dead people have not voted.

Many returning officers may already have access to such information, but they cannot use it to delete names from the register. That is what Mr. Bradley, the returning officer for Northern Ireland, told the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. The anomaly causes great difficulty when it comes to handling personation.

Personation is less likely to be of dead people than of people who do not normally vote, but I feel remiss that I did not table an amendment along the same lines. My previous proposals for rolling registers are based on the principle that accurate registers of local voters depend on the ability of the registration officer to remove the names of those who have left an area, or died. This is an important amendment.

Mr. Hancock: I support the amendment, as I am sure do my Liberal Democrat colleagues. To implement it, electoral registration officers must have the necessary resources. At present, the resources are devoted to the accurate maintenance of electoral registration are inadequate .

What is proposed is only common sense. The Home Office and Ministers with responsibility for local government must give real credibility to statements about the need for accuracy, maintenance and regular updating of electoral registration facilities. At present, those facilities are pitiful and are a real deterrent to voting. People are often offended at receiving poll cards for relatives who have died, and I have known them turn up at the polling station and refuse to vote as a protest against such inefficiency. I am aware of instances in which polling cards have been sent to people who have been dead for many years.

The amendment is long overdue.

4.45 pm

Mr. William Ross: Would it not be possible for registrars of births, deaths and marriages to send a list of the names of those who have died to the people responsible for electoral registration? That could be done once a week, or once a month, as required.

Mr. Hancock: That is an excellent suggestion, but the question is one of resources. The funding for the registrars of births, deaths and marriages is inadequate and needs to be revised.

I want the amendment to be adopted, and the suggestion from the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) is worth pursuing. However, extra resources must be devoted to the task.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Amendment No. 33 is a deceptive little amendment, since the words that it seeks to delete from the Bill are more important than the words that it seeks to add.

It is an unfortunate fact that, every year, a large number of households fail to return their electoral registration form. Electoral registration officers are assiduous in chasing missing forms, often paying several visits to the properties concerned. Even then, there are some properties from which no information is forthcoming. In such circumstances, a practice has evolved of keeping names on the register for a year in the absence of any evidence that the person concerned has moved out. We believe that this is right. In cases of uncertainty, the decision should always be to keep people on the register rather than disfranchising them.

New section 10(7) of the Representation of the People Act 1983, which schedule 1 to the Bill inserts, will simply put the existing practice on a statutory footing. I am sorry that the Opposition seek to remove the provision, since to do so would ultimately deny people the right to vote. I am sure that the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) was not aware of the result of such a deletion. Although I have some sympathy with the point that he made, the Conservative attempt to slip this through is far more worrying.

The Conservative Opposition want to insert a provision allowing registration officers to carry out an inquiry or canvass at any time of the year. In principle, that is entirely unobjectionable. But I wonder, as the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South suggested, how realistic it would be in practice. Registration officers find it difficult, costly and labour-intensive carrying out one canvass each year. I doubt whether they have the resources or the inclination to carry out a second. Do the Opposition want the Government to increase the grants to local authorities to pay for their amendment? If so, we will note such an expenditure commitment. Or do they merely want to impose the burden but not will the means?

Mr. Ross: If the hon. Gentleman checks *Hansard*, he will see that I recently tabled a number of questions inquiring about the cost of registering an elector in the various sub-divisions of the United Kingdom. He will find it of interest.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I shall certainly look with interest at the answers, which I presume came from me.

The key to the amendment is canvassing all the areas, which is what the Conservative Opposition appear to want. Amendment No. 32 would require electoral registration officers to consult the local registrars of births, marriages and deaths with a view to removing the names of the deceased from the register. Apart from the fact that people do not always conveniently die in the area where they are registered, the amendment is unnecessary.

In line 22 of page 26 of the Bill, paragraph 23(3) of schedule 1 provides that registration officers will be able to inspect records kept by

"any local or public authority".

That encompasses not just records that are publicly available, such as the local register of births, deaths and marriages, but those to which he would not otherwise have access.

Perhaps I should say in passing, with regret, that, in this group of amendments and in others that we have discussed today, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), in whose name the amendment appears, seems much keener on keeping people off the electoral register than in ensuring that as many people as possible are on it. I hope that, in the light of my comments, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) will decide to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Evans: Nothing malicious was intended by the amendments. Indeed, I am wounded by the allegation that that was our intent. It certainly was not. We want to ensure that the rolling register is kept as up to date as possible and that we empower the electoral registration officer—no, there is no spending commitment here—to ensure that the register is up to date.

The Minister says that he regrets that people do not conveniently die. I do not think that anybody conveniently dies—I suspect that in most cases they do not have a say in the matter. However, I understand that, after the 1997 election, the registration officers in one London borough that covered two constituencies did a trawl of their registers and removed more than 11,000 names because so many had been left on for so long. That can be a problem.

Mr. Simon Hughes: One merit of such a system is that it avoids any political controversy resulting from politicians trying to sort out the register themselves. I once submitted a list and made a mistake about a couple of names; people were clearly alive and well when I had passed them off as having disappeared, on the basis of good advice. I paid about a year's political price for having been so bold as to suggest that they would not be voting, given that they were very much alive and wanted to do so. So I would far rather someone else did the job.

Mr. Evans: I am sure that a number of electors disappear when they see the hon. Gentleman coming towards their door.

We are simply keen to ensure that the register is kept up to date. In addition, if the register is inaccurate and, as happened in one case, it includes thousands of names of people who are not there to vote, the percentage of the turnout at elections will be that much lower. The more accurate the register, the higher the turnout will be. Having said that, I am sure that the other place will consider carefully what has been said today, and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Barnes: I beg to move amendment No. 39, in page 22, line 22, at end insert

', unless it is made as a result of a notice issued pursuant to subsection (1)(e) above'.

Schedule 1 deals with registration and amends the 1983 Act. Paragraph 6 relates to the publication of registers, and provides for the alteration of registers and the

[Mr. Barnes]

circumstances in which that may occur. It allows for alterations when electoral returning officers have made clerical errors. That will not be allowed after the issuing of nominations.

In the winter edition of its publication *Arena*, the Association of Electoral Administrators supported the Bill but pointed out a problem:

"Whilst most of the proposals contained in the Bill will meet with the approval of the Association members, to many it will be felt that new Section 13A(4) does not go far enough. It does not enable the Electoral Registration Officer to correct his/her own clerical error brought to their attention in the period between the last day for submissions for nominations for an election and polling day. It is during this period that most of the omissions and clerical errors are detected."

That happens because that is the period in which most people pay attention to the electoral register. That is when the political parties canvass the electorate. When details are brought to the attention of the public, they may find that the details that they have submitted are not on the register, or not on it correctly. People should have some opportunity to correct errors made by electoral returning officers. I appreciate that that may require some facility for double checking before an election so that everyone is happy with the published details.

My amendment is intended to probe the Minister's thinking on this matter. Electoral returning officers themselves have identified a serious problem in the article to which I have referred.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I always pay close attention to amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) because I regard him as the father of the rolling register. His persistence has ensured that the Bill will introduce a system of rolling electoral registration.

I appreciate that that system does not go as far as my hon. Friend would wish. However, I hope that he will regard it as a first step on which we can build in due course. His amendment would mean that changes to the register which would be used at an election could be made after the closing date for nominations for that election where the alteration would merely correct a clerical error. I have considerable sympathy with the purpose behind the amendment, but there are problems with the way in which it would achieve that purpose.

In addition, there is a problem of principle. Changes should not be made to the register once the period of an election has begun. That is the current position as regards additions to the register, and the Bill replicates it under the system of rolling registration. Political parties and candidates need certainty about which, and how many, electors they will deal with at any election. The number of electors determines how much can be spent, and canvassing and leafleting will be targeted at known electors. We are reluctant to start to make exceptions to that basic principle.

However, my hon. Friend points out that his concern, and that of those to whom he has referred, is to correct a clerical error. It is difficult to object to allowing the correction of something that has been agreed to be a clerical error. However, it is possible to imagine some difference of view between individuals as to whether an error was merely clerical, or whether it had been made by the person who was registering or by the officer, and would thus have an effect to which one of the parties in the election would not be able to subscribe.

There is potential for some conflict. However, my hon. Friend suggests that the measure would apply to only a relatively small number of cases and that it would be unlikely to affect the outcome of the vast majority of election campaigns. I shall look at the issue. I am reluctant to move along the lines that he suggests, for the reasons that I have outlined—candidates need certainty. I am, however, prepared to consider whether there might be some way of considering the matter; we might talk to electoral registration officers to find out whether they have concerns as to their inability to deal with a merely clerical error. In the light of those remarks, I invite my hon. Friend to withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Simon Hughes: We support the proposition and, as the Minister appears to have given a reasonable reply, I hope that, before the Bill finishes its passage through Parliament, there will be a chance to accommodate the concerns that have been expressed. I understand the reservations, but the proposition is a good one if it can be correctly drafted.

Mr. Barnes: I am pleased that the Minister has offered to examine the matter, especially by discussing it with electoral returning officers. I understand the concerns as to the technical difficulties that may arise in getting the measure right. However, the matter of principle—that the register cannot be altered after nomination day—is not one to which I would generally adhere. Previously, I have tabled amendments to provide for altering the register after that period. The principle should be that the names of those entitled to be on the register at nomination day are the only ones that should be included. I hope that some thought will be given to the principle as well as to the practicalities and technicalities.

However, given the Minister's comments, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedule 4

ABSENT VOTING IN GREAT BRITAIN

5 pm

Mr. Barnes: I beg to move amendment No. 40, in page 34, line 48, after first "of", insert—

"his attendance at an educational establishment, or".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 41, in page 34, line 51, at end insert—

"or

(ii) "a journey over land of three miles or more".

Mr. Barnes: Schedule 4 already contains a provision to enable people in various positions, occupations or services to obtain proxies. However, there is a difficulty for another group of people—students—whom I want to add to the provision. Currently, if students are away, for an indefinite period, from the area in which they are

registered, they are barred from inclusion on registers—especially for local elections. They should be added to the schedule.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It may save my hon. Friend from trying to persuade me about amendment No. 40, if I point out that I am convinced by his argument, albeit not by the precise wording of the amendment. In due course, I shall seek to include the provision that he and I want—although not in precisely the form of his amendment.

Mr. Barnes: I am pleased to hear the Minister's response. I shall see how far I can get with amendment No. 41—although I tabled it more as a probing amendment.

There are provisions to cover proxy voting for those who have to make a journey by air or sea in order to vote. I am trying to deal with the problem of people who live in rural areas distant from polling stations. There is generally an agreement that people who live more than three miles from a school are entitled to free travel to the school, so three miles is the distance stated in the amendment. If people have to travel that far, they may experience considerably difficulty in getting to a polling station, and indeed some people may have even longer journeys.

I am not a great advocate of extending proxy voting; I tend to prefer the postal vote. It may be that the amendment should have been tabled to another part of the Bill. I am asking whether there is any means by which we can tackle the problem of people who live in isolated areas far from polling stations. This is not simply an extreme problem affecting people who live in the Western Isles; there are many parts of the country where people have difficulty getting to a polling station.

Mr. Simon Hughes: My colleagues and I have unintentionally crowded out the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) in putting our names to the amendments—we outnumber him three to one. We are very happy to have supported an amendment, No. 40, which has found favour with the Minister. I am glad that he will table an amendment at a later stage to deal with that matter.

I want to say a few words of support for amendment No. 41. My first vote was cast in a little village in north Wales called Tan-y-grisiau, which was about three or four miles from the polling station. There was no public transport, and people who did not have their own transport, such as the elderly and infirm, could not get to the polling station unless they were offered a lift.

We support the hon. Gentleman's case, which is not simply about people who live in the Outer Hebrides and have to cross water to get to the polling station. People who are prevented from voting because they cannot get from A to B should be entitled to vote by proxy, as should be those who are prevented by illness, work or study. I hope that the Minister will be sympathetic.

Mr. O'Brien: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) on the way in which he moved his amendment. As the House knows, the Bill makes a number of important changes but, on our reading of the law, the point about students and absent votes was not entirely clear, and my hon. Friend has indicated that the drafting of the Bill is deficient.

Although the wording of my hon. Friend's amendment is not correct, I give him a clear commitment that the Government will table an amendment to achieve exactly the same result. Such an amendment would simply put on a statutory footing the practice that already occurs.

I am afraid that my hon. Friend will not be as lucky with amendment No. 41, which would widen the existing grounds for proxy votes. I understand the arguments for doing so, but the Bill aims essentially to put in place the agreement that was hammered out by the working party on electoral procedures, which made it clear in its report that, although there were strong arguments for making it easier to obtain and cast postal votes, the same was not true of proxy votes.

There are number of on-going investigations into alleged proxy vote fraud—the House will understand that I do not wish to comment on those—which led the working party to conclude that this is not the right time to ease the rules governing proxy votes. I cannot therefore invite the House to accept the amendment, even though we all understand the arguments for it.

I hope that, having listened to what I have said, particularly my clear commitment on amendment No. 40, my hon. Friend will withdraw the amendment.

Mr. Barnes: In speaking to amendment No. 41, I expressed concern about its use in connection with proxy votes. It might be preferable to ease the provisions for voting in areas where it is awkward at present and, perhaps, to allow the use of postal votes. However, because the Minister said that he was willing to accept amendment No. 40 by some other method, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr. Barnes: I beg to move amendment No. 42, in page 36, line 1, at end insert—

"(2A) Where an application is granted under sub-paragraph (1) or (2), it shall be deemed to be an application to vote at all elections held on that day".

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment No. 43, in page 36, line 2, leave out "or (2)" and insert ", (2) or (2A)".

Mr. Barnes: At the last general election, which was combined with local government elections, returning officers had great difficulty in dealing with applications for temporary absent votes which specified the local election. The Home Office's advice was that applications must be made for both elections and that an application for the local election was not valid for the parliamentary elections. Most returning officers tended to ignore that advice as it was in the interests of the elector to be able to apply for an absent vote in both elections.

The Bill seems to perpetuate the current position in that people will have to apply separately to vote in both elections even though they may be held on the same day. The amendment would put into law what might be the standard shorthand practice that is used already by electoral returning officers. When elections are held together, one application should be sufficient.

Mr. Hancock: We support the amendment and congratulate the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire

[Mr. Hancock]

(Mr. Barnes) on tabling it. I hope that the Minister will be generous enough to accept that this is a common-sense measure. Many of the 25 or so elections that I have fought have corresponded with other elections. For various reasons, European and parliamentary or county and district elections have all occurred at the same time. It is ludicrous that people should have to fill in two forms. There is no sense to that. One application for elections held on one day should be sufficient. It should be easy and simple enough for the Government to accept the amendment.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We take the view that that practice is already the law. It is a matter of common sense that a person who applies for an absent vote for a particular election should not be required to make a separate application for any other election held on the same day. We believe that that is already the position and we are not aware—or, at least, have not been made aware—of any cases where returning officers have required the submission of separate applications.

We are more than happy to discuss with electoral administrators how the guidance can make it clear to them that the law requires them to have only one application form in the circumstances described. The amendments of my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) would require an application for an absent vote for a particular election to be treated in every case as an application for an absent vote at all elections on that day. However, as he well knows, some people—European Union citizens and peers, for example—are able to vote in some elections, but not in others. Such people may be entitled to vote in only one of the elections being held on a particular day and may make an absent vote application accordingly.

I hope that, in the light of what I have said and, in particular, the fact that we believe that a returning officer should already treat a single application as an application for all elections to which a person is entitled to vote to be held on the day, my hon. Friend will withdraw the amendment. However, if hon. Members have examples of returning officers requiring people to submit double applications, we shall be happy to take the matter up with them and to provide the clarification in guidance to ensure that they interpret the law properly.

Mr. Barnes: In view of my hon. Friend the Minister's comments, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Bill, as amended, to be reported.

Order for Third Reading read.

5.14 pm

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I beg to move, that the Bill be now read the Third time.

With the possible exceptions of the right hon. Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), I suspect that most right hon. and hon. Members welcome the Bill and recognise that it represents in many ways a useful step forward.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He gave me considerable assistance in Committee on, as he helpfully informed us, a no-fee basis. He also chaired the working party whose report forms the basis of the Bill. It is a good Bill, and it is a tribute to my hon. Friend's hard work and that of those who were on the working party with him that it has been brought forward. At least with most of its provisions, there has been much support from both sides of the House, and for the principles within it.

The new provisions relating to electoral registration are a good step forward, making it easier for remand prisoners, the homeless and those in mental hospitals to register to vote. These changes are long overdue.

The introduction of the rolling electoral registration will end the absurd situation in which, at present, people can wait for up to 16 months after moving house before appearing on the electoral register in respect of their new address. In future, the maximum period that most people will have to wait before getting on to the register will be six weeks, and in many instances it will be less than that.

I appreciate that the scheme may not be as elaborate as my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) might like. Nevertheless, I hope that he will take both comfort and pleasure from the fact that something for which he has campaigned for a long time is coming to fruition, and that he will regard the system that the Bill will create as a stepping stone for the future.

There will be new information technology opportunities and new abilities to go further than at present in future years. However, it will be remembered of the Bill that the working party, which was chaired by my hon. Friend the Under–Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, considered the ideas put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Derbyshire and ensured that, where his ideas were able to be introduced at this stage, they were. Some of his other ideas will provide the basis for future legislation.

Having compiled an electoral register, questions arise as to what to do with it and to whom it should be made available. We had a good discussion about the sale of the register in Committee. I do not want to repeat all that I said on that occasion, but I shall emphasise that the Government believe that electors should be given the ability to have their name excluded from the register that is made available for sale. That is for privacy and data protection reasons. However, it is also a matter of principle. It is wrong that information that people are under a statutory obligation to provide—they could be fined if they do not do that—for one purpose should then be used for another without their consent.

We think that people must be given a choice, but it must be an informed choice. We want the electorate to be told what the consequences of opting out would be, and we are happy to work with the industries concerned to settle the content of the explanatory material. We are in discussion with the credit industry—my officials held a useful meeting with representatives of it only three days ago—to ascertain how we can ensure that its interests are best preserved within the scope of the system.

One of the most important parts of the Bill is clause 10, which allows for pilot schemes for innovative electoral procedures. Like the rest of the Bill, this derives directly from a recommendation of the working party. The working party recognised that the only reliable way to establish which of the many changes to our electoral procedures which have been touted are likely to be effective is to test them. That is to put them into practice

and see how they work, find out what the problems are and sort out any glitches. Subject to the Bill receiving Royal Assent in time, we hope to be able to run the first pilot schemes in this coming May's local elections. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that many local authorities have already expressed an interest in running pilot schemes in May.

The Bill also makes it easier for those with disabilities to cast votes and simplifies our absent vote arrangements. I believe that these provisions are supported by most right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I am conscious that, in Committee, I made a number of other commitments to consider matters or to write to right hon. and hon. Members. I hope that the House will understand why it has not been possible for me to act on all of them in the short period since the end of consideration in Committee. I assure those hon. Members that I have not forgotten, and that I shall deal with those matters as quickly as possible. An advantage of a bicameral system is that amendments can be made in a second House.

The Bill is important and worth while. We have had our little difficulties with it: for example, a guillotine motion was tabled today. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) denied that it was hyperbole to describe a guillotine as damaging the fabric of our parliamentary democracy. However, he decided not to vote against the guillotine and asked me to note that he did not.

Mr. Evans: To save time.

Mr. O'Brien: I note that view, but I am bemused by the juxtaposition of the hon. Gentleman's claim and the action that he took. I also note that, at 5 pm, no Tory Back-Bench Members were in the Chamber and the hon. Gentleman held the fort for the Opposition by himself. He did it ably, but by himself. That says much about our earlier debate.

The Bill is worth while and some of the discussions in Committee have the shown the House at its best. Our electoral procedures have served us well in many ways but it is right to update procedures that were devised in the 19th century and ensure that they are suitable for the 21st century, while being careful not to lose the fairness and the integrity that characterises them. That spirit underpinned the working party's work on electoral procedures and our deliberations so far on the Bill. I hope that all hon. Members will support it and that it will receive a fair wind as it completes its passage and, in due course, becomes law.

5.22 pm

Mr. Evans: I shall be brief to allow other hon. Members an opportunity to speak. The Bill is an important, extensive constitutional measure, which transfers sweeping powers to the Home Secretary, not only to trial pilots, but, through clause 11, to change by statutory instrument the way in which we vote in several elections. We are therefore keen for the Bill to be properly scrutinised.

Last night was regrettable; yesterday was a bad day for representative democracy for two reasons. First, an important constitutional Bill was guillotined. Secondly, scheduling two important Bills for consideration after Report and Third Reading was a grave error. Consensus is not an excuse for sloppy scrutiny, but a reason for hon. Members to examine a measure's minutiae more closely. We know that the Government want the Bill to be passed quickly, but let us get it right.

As the Minister said, the Government have accepted the thrust of some of our amendments. That is why we divided the Committee only twice. There is a great deal of consensus on the Bill, which aims to increase turnout at elections, increase registration and make voting easier. We support those aims, but we urge caution. In their hurry, the Government should not allow on to the statute book a Bill that has more holes than an Emmental cheese.

I trust that, when the Bill returns from another place, many of our amendments will have been accepted. Clause 9 could have important repercussions. The Government state that they do not want charities or businesses to be hit, but that will happen if the clauses remains unamended.

The credit implications for consumers may be wide. If that is so, the less-well-off will be hit. There is a problem that the head of the household could tick the relevant box on behalf of everyone on the electoral register in the household. If such people are excluded from the commercial register, their credit status may be affected.

Charities will also be adversely affected. The provision will not stop junk mail, but increase it, and charities will have to spend more money on mail than on good causes.

We are worried about the integrity of the vote when more people are eligible to register. We want more people to be able to vote and a relaxation of the rules on postal votes will help to ensure that. The days of the coach and horses have passed. We are in the 21st century and that should be reflected in the availability of postal votes.

The rolling register will be useful in easing registration, and I say again that it is a great shame that the by-election to be held in Ceredigion on 3 February will take place two weeks before the new register comes into effect. As many as 10,000 people in that constituency may be excluded from taking part in the by-election. I am sad that that has been done by the nationalists, and it is a matter of regret that many first-time voter students will be prevented from voting in that by-election.

We shall examine the Bill carefully when it comes back from the other place. The European elections, in which a 23 per cent. turnout was recorded, were the last real trial before a dramatic change in the voting system.

We cannot treat the electorate as an inconvenient and troublesome entity, a legal necessity to be dealt with before the Government can get on with their work. We must listen to the public. Their concerns go beyond the ease of voting. They are questioning the worth of voting. The Government must learn that making promises that cannot be kept, being arrogant once the election is over, and using spin instead of substance is not good enough.

5.26 pm

Mr. Barnes: In legislation that failed at earlier stages, I have brought three provisions in the Bill to the attention of the House.

One important development is the registration of homeless people. Up to now, although technically homeless people could get on registers, the fact that they did not have a place of residence made that extremely difficult. Now that has been enshrined in legislation.

[Mr. Barnes]

although there has been much debate about whether the Bill provides sufficient protection. Nevertheless, the provision is very much in line with a measure that I introduced in the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill 1997, and I am pleased that it has been adopted.

Another measure that I have pursued on numerous occasions concerns access for disabled people to polling stations. Although some progress has been made, much still needs to be done. I was disappointed by the Minister's response when we debated the matter. It is possible that, in future, access to polling stations for disabled people will be developed further. Perhaps there will be legislation ensuring the civil rights of disabled people, which the disability movement has called for. A great deal of work has been done by Scope and others. The amendment that I tabled was taken from my Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill 1994.

The Bill will be known chiefly for the establishment of the rolling register. That is important because it establishes a principle, even if there is some argument about the detail. Once the principle has been established that the register should take account of where people are at a particular time, further detail and improvements that new technology may make possible can be added later.

The first mention of a rolling register may have been in the context of the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, which I introduced in 1993. The Bill failed to get through on a Friday because I could not carry the closure motion. It was won by 78 votes to nil because the then Government merely put in tellers.

Among the 78 hon. Members who supported the concept of rolling registers were four who, by that time or later, were leaders of the parliamentary Labour party—Neil Kinnock, the late John Smith, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, and the present Prime Minister—and 12 members of the present Government, including my hon. Friend on the Front Bench tonight. Furthermore, the three Labour hopefuls for candidate for mayor of London were among the 78. There was support from other parties and the tellers were a member of the Scottish National party and the Liberal Democrat spokesman on constitutional issues. The matter has a long history, and I am pleased that we have established those measures.

In Committee, I went through the detail of what needs to be done. We have just started out on achieving a modern rolling register—sometimes it stands still and sometimes it moves forward a bit—but the key point is that it needs to be established and we have got ourselves on that road. I have been involved in these matters in the House for 12 years. In February 1988, when the timetable motion for the Bill that introduced the poll tax was tabled, I said that there was a problem—I later realised that there were many other difficulties—because millions of people would be missing from the electoral register. About 1 million people were cleared off the register by the operation of the poll tax, but we have put some of the damage right and started to set in place the processes that will overcome it.

It is argued that constitutional matters should be debated on the Floor of the House and there is a retrospective argument that the poll tax, which was linked with electoral registers, should have been dealt with in that way. The constitutional implications should have been dealt with at that time.

5.32 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: I shall be brief, as one or two other colleagues want to speak. As we said at the beginning of our proceedings, we support the Bill—at least where the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) proposed and the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland considered. The House is now disposing, which shows the benefit of sticking with a measure over a long period to win the argument and win the day. I pay tribute to those who made submissions to the working party, colleagues from all parties who took part and the Under-Secretary, who chaired it.

The Bill was intended to be the part of the electoral reform process on which there could be agreement. To that extent, it is worth while and has been supported from those on the Liberal Democrat Benches, as from elsewhere. We do not agree on certain issues, however, and want to introduce certain measures, the most obvious of which is electoral reform—certainly in local government and perhaps later in national government—but we have accepted that the Bill is not the correct vehicle for that. We shall return to that argument.

On clause 9, I understand and share the Minister's point of view that people should have the right to prevent their name from going out for commercial purposes. That is the right principle. He made a helpful concession to the concerns of the charitable organisations and others, and I hope that the arguments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) will be reflected in the Bill's further progress in the other place. Although we regret that a guillotine motion was tabled, we accept that it is important to balance debates that go on for ever against the chance to test a measure. There was consensus, but we have to get the drafting right in case a constitutional Bill goes through on the nod because it is uncontroversial. I hope that the Minister's undertakings mean that such issues can be reconsidered after proper examination. My colleagues and I will be happy to look at them in advance to try to achieve maximum agreement in the other place and in the House.

The Bill's purposes are to make it easier for people to exercise their democratic rights and to do so in a more modern context. It achieves both. Pilot schemes for testing a proposition are a good idea and, if they work, should be carried out more widely. Achieving a more up-to-date register and providing access to it for the homeless, the mentally ill who have not been convicted and those in prison who have not been convicted are socially progressive changes. They should have happened before, but they are happening now. We welcome the Bill and hope that it is further improved in the other place and when it returns to the House.

5.35 pm

Mr. William Ross: The Home Secretary said earlier that he was pleased that the working party had been able to proceed on a basis of consensus, and that, with a single exception, all its recommendations had been accepted by all representatives, including those of the three political parties. However, none of those three parties included a member from Northern Ireland, the one part of the United

Kingdom where there is a clear understanding of the capacity for fraud in the electoral system. An opportunity was missed, and I hope that the Minister will bear that in mind in the event of any such exercise in the future.

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The electoral registration officer for Northern Ireland was, of course, a member of the working party.

Mr. Ross: He is an official, not a politician. I am talking about political parties.

I am deeply concerned about the possibility that postal voting will be made easy. When it was tried in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, or possibly the 1980s, it was a massive disaster: it led to an immense increase in the amount of fraud and, over the years, further measures had to be introduced successively in an attempt to combat the problem.

The question of identification has been mentioned. We in Northern Ireland have been driven, relentlessly, to a point at which we believe that the only possible means of identification is a common identity card tied to a unique number of members of each electorate, and featuring a photograph. Nothing else will do if we come up against carefully organised fraud in the electoral system.

On Second Reading, the Home Secretary said:

"By modernising electoral procedures, we shall make it easier and more convenient for people to vote to exercise their rights in a democracy."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 340, c. 248.]

That is all well and good, but the right hon. Gentleman had already said:

"I do not believe, and I am sure that no Member of the House believes, that the Bill will arrest and reverse the decline in turnout at all levels of election. Whatever the electoral procedures are, people will vote only if they are interested in the body being elected and feel that it is worth while to vote."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 1999; Vol. 340, c. 173.]

There seems to be a certain amount of muddled thinking. It appears that the Government do not believe that making the process easier will make it more likely that people will vote.

The Minister will recall a point that I made earlier about the qualifying date, as it is still called. He said that people would be able to register at any time, but that there would be an annual canvass—which constitutes a qualifying date, in a new guise. He told me that my proposed date of 15 September would mean that the canvass would have to take place during a holiday period.

The date of the canvass is a legal date. It is not possible to consider who is entitled to be on the register until that date, or beyond. People may die or move away right up to the date, whatever it may be. It would be possible to move the first register from 1 November rather than 1 December. That would involve a good deal of canvassing in the second half of September and the first half of October, when the weather would be better.

The intention is clearly to make the register as accurate as possible. That surely demands a common computer system, enabling us to marry all the different United Kingdom registers and check whether people are engaged in multiple voting.

I am not in favour of rolling registration, which I consider to be misconceived. There used to be a better system, enabling names to be added and registers to be corrected. I mentioned earlier that a cost was involved. On 20 December, the Minister told me that it cost £40 million to register electors in England and Wales at approximately £1 per elector. The Secretary of State for Scotland told me that, in Scotland, the cost was about £4 million a year, just under £1 per elector. The cost of registering an elector in Northern Ireland was 44p.

This is the most comprehensive system in the United Kingdom. All premises are visited at least once a year. Perhaps the Minister will examine the position, and see why the cost is nearly two and a half times as much in the rest of the United Kingdom. The interesting thing is that it costs only 20p to correct a clerical error, but £1.27 for a postal vote.

I do not want to take up the House's time because we do not have long, but I should like to raise two other matters. If we go to computer voting, we must remember that hackers have always been able to break into any system. Will the Minister also remember that electoral law is now complex? It is scattered over quite a large number of pieces of legislation. A comprehensive consolidation is overdue. Will he please set that in train?

5.40 pm

Mr. Forth: I do not agree with the Bill. It is not necessary. The analysis, such as it is, has not demonstrated the need for it. I fail to see how, given that there are different turnouts at different elections, the Bill will make much difference.

Nor do I agree that the magical new process of a working party is an acceptable, or desirable, part of our processes here. The simple, repeated use of the word "consensus" does not validate a measure and should not eliminate proper legislative scrutiny.

For what it is worth, the only acceptable provision in the Bill is that on the rolling register. It is valid. If the Bill had consisted just of that, it would probably have taken us forward. The rest of it is partly unnecessary and partly extremely dangerous.

During scrutiny of the Bill, we have exposed its loopholes and weaknesses, which still exist. Despite Ministers' undertakings, I am not convinced that, when the pilot schemes are launched, they will take place in a secure environment that will make us happy with the way in which our elections are proceeded with. That is particularly the case with the ludicrous local connection provision, which strikes me—it has been mentioned many times—as an open door to fraud, manipulation and misuse of our electoral system.

All in all, this is an unhappy Bill. I hope that it has not set any precedents. I should like to think that it will not see the light of day, but, if it does, I hope that, at the very least, Ministers' undertakings will be put into place, probably in another place.

5.42 pm

Mr. Hancock: I am grateful for the 90 seconds that I have to praise part of the Bill.

Most people would welcome the opportunity for an improved register. Still, much needs to be done. We need to ensure that local authorities fund the improved register properly and that there are not the wide variations in accuracy from local authority to local authority that occur at the moment. The opportunity to have elections on

[Mr. Hancock]

another day and allowing elections over the two days in a weekend will be a major breakthrough and might, in itself, be significant in increasing the number of people who take part in elections.

I agree with the points that were made by the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) on access for disabled people. More needs to be done. There are still polling stations that are very difficult for people to get in and out of. I have been in some where the ballot box has been brought to the door because people could not get in. That cannot be right. The problem continues, so we still have much to do.

As we have stated, clause 11 is dangerous. I would have liked primary legislation to be used for a nationwide change, but I accept what the Minister said.

All in all, the Bill is a step in the right direction. We should support anything that encourages and allows more people to get the opportunity to vote, but the one thing that we should not forget is that any change in democracy is expensive. There will be a price. I hope that people do not back away from initiatives that are contained in the Bill because of the price that accompanies them. The point that was made by Northern Ireland colleagues is valid. For the life of me, I cannot understand why there should be such a wide disparity in what it costs to register someone. Perhaps we have to look at that matter.

It being four hours after the start of proceedings on the Allocation of Time motion, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *put the Question already proposed from the Chair, pursuant to Order [this day].*

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Braithwaite Report

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kirkwood.]*

5.44 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (on behalf of the House of Commons Commission): It falls to me as the member of the House of Commons Commission who speaks for the Commission on the Floor of the House to introduce what is an important debate, where we will seek to review the management and service processes that are applicable to the House of Commons.

I am grateful to the Leader of the House for finding time for the debate. I know how difficult it is to find precious Floor time to discuss such matters. I am also grateful that we are able to have this debate on the Adjournment, allowing the broadest possible debate, so that the Commission may have the advantage of the broadest possible canvass of hon. Members' views.

I realise that we are subject to time constraints, and I hope that hon. Members who have taken the trouble to attend the debate will be prepared to wait and see it through to its logical conclusion.

Whatever else may be in doubt, it is difficult to take the view that this debate is premature. It is now 10 years since the House last examined these important matters, and, in this day and age of perpetual modernisation and exponential change, surely it is right for us to take stock of how we run the House of Commons for ourselves, for our constituents and for the wider British public.

It is also true that few hon. Members come to Parliament intent on making any great career out of stock control systems for the Refreshment Department. However, many hon. Members freely give their time to assist in the efficient management of the House, and we are very grateful to them for all the work that they do.

The House of Commons is a unique institution in more ways than one, and it has its own very real structural difficulties and environmental constraints. The fact that it works as well as it does is testimony to the dedication and commitment of the staff who serve us at all levels within the precincts of the Palace and the House of Commons.

I do not wish to detain the House, but should like to make one or two introductory remarks that set the context of the debate.

On 26 October 1998, on a recommendation from the Clerk of the House, the House of Commons Commission appointed Mr. Michael Braithwaite, formally a partner in Deloitte and Touche, to undertake the study. He was assisted, crucially, by Mr. Tony Newton—Lord Newton of Braintree, Leader of the House from 1992 to 1997—and, additionally, by three officers from different Departments of the House.

The study took eight months and cost about £77,000. The team reported to the Commission on 22 June 1999. The Commission immediately considered the report at no fewer than three meetings in the summer, and the report that we are now considering was published in full immediately thereafter.

The inquiry that the Braithwaite team undertook was much longer and much more detailed, ironically, than the Ibbs inquiry which it follows up. The team took a great deal of written evidence and interviewed no fewer than

105 people, some on two or more occasions, including current and former Ministers, Chairmen, heads of department, senior officials, and, importantly, 40 hon. Members, selected carefully to match the current composition of the House in age and length of service. The list of the interviewees is shown at annexes A and B in the report.

The team was also helpfully able to include questions of its own in the enormously detailed quality of service survey, which was conducted among all hon. Members, early last year, by Janet Levin Associates. All the results of that survey were made available to the inquiry team. In making international comparisons—which the team did—of parliamentary administration in other parts of the world, it had the help of no fewer than 14 overseas Parliaments.

It was an extremely thorough exercise, and hon. Members are most grateful to Michael Braithwaite and his team for their work, which was discharged timeously and with enthusiasm, great sensitivity and great skill. As I said, certainly the Commission is extremely grateful for the work that Mr. Braithwaite has done.

The Commission regard the report as a very professional piece of work: it is constructive and a sound basis on which we can take the debate forward. We have not, however, taken a formal view of the report's recommendations in advance of today's debate. However, after the report's publication, in the summer, we invited all hon. Members—and everyone else—to give us their views.

We received a very useful paper from the Finance and Services Committee, and one letter from a member of the public—good for him!—but nothing else from which to believe that the report has stirred up a great storm of controversy. Nevertheless, I stand to be corrected on that later in the debate.

As to the next steps, the Commission will meet again after today's debate to decide how to take matters forward. The Braithwaite team described the recommendations as a package rather than a menu, but I should like to reinforce very firmly that that does not mean that the report is a take it or leave it option. It simply means that any changes to the recommendations would need to be balanced elsewhere to ensure a consistent approach.

I shall not take the House through the report, because we do not have time, but it has a clear summary on pages 9 to 14, as well as a list of recommendations. However, I should like to set the report in context.

The Ibbs report 10 years ago considered the management of the House's services and the direction that was available from Members. It found profoundly unsatisfactory elements in the responsibilities and structures then in force and in the way operations were discharged. The so-called Ibbs settlement provided a clear way forward that separated the formulation of policy from the delivery of services and, crucially, gave the House responsibility for its accommodation and works. We tend to forget what a huge cultural change that was. The House had quickly to take responsibility for all its finances. That was a major challenge for the administration.

The Braithwaite team concluded that the Ibbs settlement sent the House in the right direction, but found that its implementation was patchy for a long time after the agreement. That is covered in parts 4 to 7 of the report.

More encouragingly, there has been faster progress recently. The report goes out of its way to pay tribute to the present Clerk of the House, his predecessor Sir Donald Limon and the Director of Finance and Administration for the major improvements over the past two or three years, which the team helpfully analysed at some length. The report also acknowledges the substantial contribution made by Members of Parliament as individuals and as Chairmen and members of Committees.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The Ibbs report was valuable and changed the way in which many matters were dealt with. One of its aspects was the communications problem. That is a serious problem, because many Members of Parliament know little, if anything, about the work of the Commission. That gap remains. The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) answered only 14 questions throughout the previous Session, all of which were written questions. Is there a way of dealing with that criticism, which Ibbs made so many years ago?

Mr. Kirkwood: I am grateful for that helpful intervention. The right hon. Gentleman has identified one of the Commission's areas of concern. The Braithwaite report makes some serious suggestions to address it. It is a long while since Members of Parliament had time to go through the written answers in *Hansard* to stay in touch with what is happening. There are some important suggestions about putting information on the intranet or, by agreement, carrying the basic recommendations and outcomes of some of the Committees, including the Commission, in the weekly Whip. We understand that there is a lack of communication. The Braithwaite report identifies the need for improvement and makes some positive suggestions, which I hope will be put into effect. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who is a distinguished and experienced parliamentarian, for drawing that point to the attention of the House.

The Braithwaite report updates Ibbs 10 years on, clarifying many changes that have been made since then. It highlights the important new role of information technology and the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting that we are all facing. Above all, it points out that expectations of accountability and transparency in the governance of public bodies are far greater than ever. We parliamentarians must ensure that we are beyond criticism in that respect. The report aims to give us the means to do that.

The report has several key elements. First, it stresses the importance of strategic planning, with suggestions on how to put the House of Commons Commission in a better position to discharge that function and with a framework within which the rest of House policy can be conducted.

Secondly, a much closer relationship is felt to be necessary between the Commission and a slightly smaller Finance and Services Committee, and better support for both these bodies is a key recommendation of the report. Thirdly, a clearer role for domestic Committees is recommended. It is recommended that we go back to the Ibbs scheme, giving the Committees a clearer role in policy formulation but not encouraging them to get involved in Executive and operational areas.

Fourthly, better information for Members—the point that the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) mentioned—on the planning and delivery

[Mr. Kirkwood]

of all services across the gamut of the House's work is referred to. Fifthly, reference is made to the improved operation of the Board of Management, and proper support for the Board of Management and for the Clerk of the House in trying to develop the corporate thinking and approach to the management of services in the House of Commons.

Sixthly, formal recognition of the Clerk's role is an essential element of the report, in terms of directing the House and reflecting the Clerk's actual role and the way in which he has done his work over the past three years, consolidating the primus inter pares role that he has discharged in the past. Finally, reference is made to the improvements in value for money and audit, including the crucial recommendation that we appoint some kind of audit committee to bring accountability up to date.

All these elements are crucial planks of the Braithwaite team's report. It is an incremental, not a radical approach. Braithwaite builds on the Ibbs settlement. It is not as radical as Ibbs but, as the report itself makes clear, it does not need to be because, over the past few years, the culture and approach to the management and delivery of services has changed out of all recognition.

In many cases, Braithwaite's recommendations are merely designed to buttress achievements already made or progress already under way. It is important to note that Braithwaite warns that the House's service will have, and is having, to cope with major challenges in its ordinary work—never mind management changes—through the introduction of resource accounting and budgeting, devolution, modernisation, Committee changes, the implications of House of Lords reform, the impact of human rights legislation, accommodation moves, information technology developments, data protection and freedom of information.

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): I apologise to the hon. Gentleman and to you, Madam Speaker, for not being here at the start of the debate.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned IT. The Braithwaite report recommends that the responsibilities of the Broadcasting Committee should be transferred to the Administration Committee. In view of the comments on the advances in IT, does the Commission consider that if the Broadcasting Committee should cease to exist, it would be more appropriate if its functions were transferred to the Information Committee, rather than the Administration Committee?

Mr. Kirkwood: I am well aware of that argument. If this is phase 1, that question is for phase 2. I give the hon. Gentleman an undertaking that, when the appropriate moment comes to decide important issues such as that, proper consultation will be carried out. The arguments are compelling.

Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): Does the hon. Gentleman share my frustration about the recommended existence, post-Braithwaite, of the domestic Committees, given that, identified within the Ibbs and Braithwaite reports, there is still a problem in terms of confusion in line management, accountability and the transparency of the role of domestic Committees? Would the hon. Gentleman and the Commission consider a more streamlined approach, with none of the domestic Committees, so that the responsibility would clearly lie with the newly outlined Central Management Committee?

Mr. Kirkwood: I understand what the hon. Lady says, and the report says that we should try to redefine and crystallise the role of domestic Committees to try to get them to be policy advisers, rather than interfering—if that is not a pejorative word—with operational functions and executive work, which should be the task of the professionals. The main thrust of the recommendations in the report is that we should try to refocus that work, as the Committees still have a valuable role to play.

The work of the domestic Committees, however, will have to be considered carefully during the rest of this Parliament. The view was expressed in the consultation process that we would be better off taking a radical approach to domestic Committees. I agree with the hon. Lady that the membership of the Committees has shown a worrying tendency to churn. There is no consistency, people have other priorities and corporate knowledge is not built up. That is worrying. The short-term proposal in the report is clear—we should keep the Committees but try to redefine their role. If the situation does not improve, we may need to reconsider in the not-too-distant future.

Progress has been made recently, and that view was strongly supported by the views of Members in a survey conducted by Janet Levin. Ten years ago, only 31 per cent. thought the House was a very or fairly good place to work, in terms of its accommodation. That has now risen to 70 per cent. Of those Members who said in the survey that they understood how the House services are managed, 79 per cent. said that they thought that they were well managed. We are a demanding group of customers and those figures represent a considerable achievement by the Clerk, the heads of Departments and the staff of the House.

We must not be complacent. The report also makes it clear that improved structures and methods are needed to ensure that progress does not falter, and that more is now expected of a public body, in terms of value for money and clear aims and accountability, than 10 years ago. It also makes it clear that the working environment will continue to change—for example, because of the impact of technology on information, communications and knowledge systems. As I said earlier, our expectations will also continue to increase, alongside those of our constituents.

The report seeks to equip the House with the means to meet some of those new challenges. After this debate, the Commission will be better placed to decide how to take matters forward. Should the report be implemented, in whole or in part, the process of implementation—which is contained in part 16 of the report—will be transparent, and Members and staff will be fully informed about it and will be able to comment on, and contribute to, it as it proceeds.

Doing nothing is not an option. The report's recommendations amount to a touch on the tiller, not a fundamental change of course, and I look forward to responding to the points raised in this debate. I commend the report to the House.

6.2 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): I welcome the report. We should all be grateful to the staff of the House in every Department, because they go out of their way to please Members of Parliament in every way that they can—and I can say with confidence as chair of the parliamentary Labour party that it is not always easy to please Members of Parliament. The staff of the House work hard and try hard, and nothing that I am about to say should be taken as a criticism of them. Nor should it be taken too much as a criticism of the House of Commons Commission, because it has a difficult task, for two reasons. First, it is hard to achieve a structure of management that works for a place such as this and protects the rights and interests of Members. Secondly, and particularly important, it is difficult to engage the interest of Members in this issue until they complain about the structure.

Members do complain about the structure, and the most frequent complaint is that nobody understands how the management system of the House works. That complaint comes from old and new Members alike. It would be easy to claim that it was Members' fault for not making the effort to find out, for not speaking to members of the Commission or for not answering the surveys and questionnaires that are sent out from time to time. However, the more fundamental problem is that the system that we have adopted is not the right system. I do not agree with the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) that we need only a touch on the tiller. We need a more radical approach. I do not suggest that we sweep aside everything we have, because it has many good aspects, but it is not working and I shall give evidence for that statement later.

The problem is—the hon. Gentleman touched on it—there is no clear perception of who is in charge of what in the House. That is the key problem. The report wrestles with that problem. A number of the answers in annexe C show the difficulties encountered by the House and the Commission. That annexe continually emphasises the difficulty of communicating with hon. Members, and how hard it is to get an impression of how well the House is run.

The report compares the task of managing the House to trying to manage accommodation for 659 small companies. I understand that analogy, but consider it mistaken, as it leads one in the wrong direction. It gives the impression that Members of Parliament might be considered as 659 market stalls under a dome, and that the task of the management of the House is to ensure that the roof does not leak.

I prefer to think of the House as accommodating 659 individuals—or several thousand individuals, given our capacity to have a split-personality mode—with different needs at different times. The management of the House provides a common structure through which all our needs—whether they involve catering, cleaning, repair works, or security, for example—can be met.

The problem is that the House retains a system of management that resembles an old-style local authority before the introduction of chief executives. There are a number of Domestic Committees that want to, and try to, do their jobs well, without getting too involved, as the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire noted. However, given their structure, it is almost inevitable that they do get too involved.

Lorna Fitzsimons: Does my hon. Friend agree that a prime example of the policy and management confusion that he has described is the decision by the Select Committee on Administration that 259 requests for on-site child care facilities amounted to insufficient demand?

Mr. Soley: I was not aware of that decision. As an aside, I can say to my hon. Friend that I do not think that it is a good idea to give responsibility for the media to the Administration Committee, as the report states that there should be a media department in the chief Clerk's office—the office of the Clerk of the House. That would be another example of duplication of effort.

The old local authorities worked quite well in their day, but the more complex decisions get, and the more intense the demands on management become, the more likely it is that that model will break down. Above all, the need for a central, focal point where people can complain becomes increasingly necessary. That is vital: hon. Members from all parties feel that there exists no such central point to which they can resort for help.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is extremely important to have one person who has complete and utter responsibility for all the arrangements in the House? Does he also agree that the difficulty is compounded by the fact that hon. Members also have constituencies elsewhere in the country? Many of us have to run two offices simultaneously, yet in the past the administrative arrangements in the House have not acknowledged how important that is for our work.

Mr. Soley: I am sure that hon. Members must retain overall political control of the management of the House. We must not lose that power, and I shall suggest how that might be achieved in due course.

I felt that it could not be accidental that so many hon. Members should ask me—especially since I have been chairman of the parliamentary Labour party—about whom to contact about problems in the House. Over the past day or two, I have asked more than 40 hon. Members from all parties to tell me whom they would turn to if they had a problem with the management of the House.

Of the hon. Members that I approached, 25 replied that they would contact the Serjeant at Arms. Another 15 came into the "don't know" category. They were the closest runners up, but the trend was all in their favour and I suspect that they would have ended up leading the field if I had asked the same question of more Members. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will be pleased to know that she led the field among the also-rans. She had four nominations. You, Madam Speaker, had two. I, as chair of the parliamentary Labour party, had three. The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire had one—that was because I asked a Liberal Democrat Member who knew that the hon. Gentleman was on the Commission. The regional Whip and the Chief Whip were also mentioned.

The most important thing about the question was that, with one exception, nobody gave the right answer, given what the report recommends and says is happening

[Mr. Soley]

already. More important, with the exception of the person who mentioned the regional Whip, everybody hesitated, paused and struggled to work out the answer. They did not say "The Serjeant at Arms" or even "I don't know" immediately; they would pause first.

I was reminded by the report that the chief Clerk has been the chief executive for the past two or three years. I said to some people—I did not ask everyone—"If you were in any other organisation, whether it was public, private, a local authority or a hospital, whom would you contact?" Without hesitation, they answered, "the chief executive." But when I asked just a few whether they knew that there had been a chief executive here for two or three years, I received replies like, "You must be joking," and "I don't believe you." Rather more worryingly—perhaps because I misphrased the question and asked someone in a slightly conspiratorial manner, "Did you know the chief Clerk is really the chief executive?"—the reply was, "You look tired. Why don't you take a break?" I am all for taking a break; I think that I need one at times in this game.

The essence is that no one knew whom to write to. Yet the report clearly shows that the person to write to is the chief Clerk. Paragraph 9 of the summary states:

"The Clerk of the House was seen by Ibbs as the chief executive; has assumed this role to a much greater extent over the last two to three years".

The report then compliments him on improving the service. I agree—I think that he does a very good job. The report continues:

"The Clerk needs better support; there should be a small but high-powered Office of the Clerk, which should also co-ordinate the decision-making process and provide support for the Commission, the Finance and Services Committee and the Board of Management."

In all other structures, such a person is treated as the chief executive. Someone who knows to write to the head of the catering department will obviously do so. A matter about the service in a dining room, for example, might be addressed to the manager of the catering department or even to the Catering Committee, but many questions are not so clear cut.

A hospital is in many ways similar to this place—because we have to respect the sensitivities of the staff, both doctors and management, but when we have doubts, we do not ask who is head of the oncology department, or who is in charge of the midwives—we write to the chief executive, who then takes the matter up.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I am having difficulty with the hon. Gentleman's analogy, because he is in danger of loading the wrong kind of function on to the person with the senior position on the management board. We often write to chief executives of organisations, but we know very well that consumer relations departments draft their replies for them. We hope that chief executives of organisations are looking to the management priority questions in the longer term, not dealing with every complaint about every department.

Mr. Soley: The right hon. Gentleman is right, but he is not disagreeing with me. I do not expect the chief executive to deal with such matters. I am saying that, when people are unsure who to contact, they contact the chief executive who makes sure that the matter is dealt with by the relevant person in the managerial hierarchy. It is not a question of customer relations. In hospitals, local authorities and big companies, customer relations departments deal only with a certain type of question. If we ask, as we often do, about problems that our constituents have, such as leaky roofs, we write to the director of housing if we know who that is. If not, we write to the chief executive, who then passes the letter on to the relevant manager.

Lorna Fitzsimons: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a matter of accountability, and not just of responsiveness and the ease with which Members may correspond with a single figure who can field any inquiry? We need to know who is accountable for running this place.

Mr. Soley: I agree, and I am troubled to feel that we may take a wrong turning. There is a lot of repressed demand among Members for knowing how the place works. At present, they—particularly new Members—ask someone such as myself, as chairman of the PLP, or the Leader of the House or their Whip. However, many of the people of whom I asked questions had 15 years or more of service, and they were among the "don't-knows". We are not getting the message across about the management structure. We need a system that people can see and understand so that they may refer to a central point if they are not sure of where in the management structure they should go with a query.

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I hope not to make a speech because, as a member of the Commission, I am here to listen to Members. My hon. Friend and I have previously discussed my reservations about his approach, but I entirely agree, as does the Braithwaite report, that our arrangements are not sufficiently well known. That problem needs to be addressed, and one reason for proposing a proper office for the Clerk is the attempt to find a means of doing so.

I share the view of the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) that we may be in danger of taking the wrong route. This is a special, if rather peculiar, place. My hon. Friend will observe that annexe G of the Braithwaite report draws attention to the fact that the Canadian Parliament tried a divided system but has brought it all back together. In addition, the Swedes experimented with a divided system, but have brought it back together. My anxiety is that only one person will be in charge. With the utmost respect to the Clerk's Department, there are occasions on which Members are not entirely sure that the Clerks appreciate our problems as much as we would wish. If we bring in an outside professional, we shall see the same problem in spades.

Mr. Soley: I understand my right hon. Friend's view, which we have discussed. I suspect that our differences are not too great because I certainly do not believe that all that we do now is wrong or that the direction in which we are going is entirely wrong. However, the evidence of my questions to Members has demonstrated that we are failing almost entirely to get across the message about how the place is managed. If my right hon. Friend or the

hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire conduct the same exercise, they will be astonished by the comments that they hear and will quickly identify deep frustration about how the place is managed and lack of awareness of how to intervene.

I am aware that the report considered experience overseas, and it would be rash to ignore that experience by going our own way. I am cautious about the approach that we should take. It is important that someone at Member of Parliament level—an individual or a Committee—should have overall charge, which is why the Commission is vital. However, as I said in my evidence to the review—I cannot say that my views are shared by the whole parliamentary Labour party, but can say categorically that there is strong dissatisfaction with the management structure—although I should prefer a system that recognises the special nature of this place, the same arguments were used in hospitals before chief executives were brought in. It was said that hospitals should not have chief executives because doctors should make clinical judgments. In this place, people say, "You can't have a chief executive because we are politicians and we have to relate to our constituents."

However, the two are not incompatible. There could be a chief executive who deals with straightforward general control of management and who is accountable—whether for leaky roof, the overall running of the catering department and so on. On the other side, there would be the Clerks doing the things that they do so well: the servicing of Members' work—the all-important core work of the House, in the Chamber, in Committees and so on. We should still need some domestic Committees, although we are all agreed—including the Braithwaite team—that there are too many of them. They are too varied and sometimes it is unclear whether they are making policy or solving day-to-day problems.

If we set up the system that I described, we would have a senior parliamentarian—who is, at present, rightly you, Madam Speaker—as Chair of the Commission. The members of the Commission would be crucial to the system. I do not propose that as a perfect model, but it would be a way of bringing together the roles of a chief executive and the Clerks.

We are in danger of taking a wrong turning in this matter. Paragraph 9 would inevitably drive us towards—as it indeed confirms—a much more powerful Clerk's Department, which would be responsible for the management. However we dress it up, that would be true. The hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire and other members of the Commission should think about that. If people ask me whom they should contact and it is not immediately obvious, I tell them to write to the chief Clerk. If that becomes the thing to do—especially if there is, as I suspect, some repressed demand—the chief Clerk will have to do much more such chief executive work.

Paragraph 9 points out that the Clerk's Department will have to be expanded—so it will. If we all took the approach that I described, the chief Clerk would quickly demand those extra resources that the report states are necessary. In a year or two, the chief Clerk would have so much to do to ensure the proper management of the House and to check—as required under paragraph 9—that other Departments are doing their job properly that he would have too little time to give to the all-important work of the Clerk's Department, not the least of which is reading up, and constantly keeping on top of, parliamentary procedure. That work is incredibly demanding. We should not be asking the chief Clerk to undertake both forms of work.

In a few years' time, we shall have come full circle. The chief Clerk will ask for a deputy to deal with the managerial side. We might as well call that person a chief executive. That is why I say that there is a danger. It is as though the report has set up, almost by accident, the model that I described; matters will drift in that direction, if the chief Clerk is treated as a chief executive as the report recommends.

The debate is extremely important. I should like to think that Members will read it avidly in *Hansard* tomorrow and, at last, get involved in understanding the management system. I do not think that that will happen, but the consequences of recommendation 9 are that, over time, the chief Clerk will increasingly become the chief executive of the House. He will end up with a double role—trying to do his job as chief Clerk and as manager of the managers.

Sooner or later, we shall have to separate those tasks—just as all other modern organisations, private or public, have had to do. The Commission seems to be taking that route without quite realising it. That is how we shall end up. I would rather that we structured the matter so that we knew that we were taking that course and did not drift into it. The last thing I want to do is to produce such a work load for the Clerk's Department that the Clerks are unable to give time, attention and detail to their Committee and Floor of the House work. If they cannot do that work well, it will do enormous damage to this place.

6.25 pm

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I have an interest as one of the three parliamentary non-remunerated directors of Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit Ltd. I have also had the privilege, during the enforced absence of the Chairman of the Broadcasting Committee, to act as Chairman of that Committee.

I shall move straight into part of the phase 2 debate that was referred to earlier. I shall comment briefly on Braithwaite's recommendation for the Broadcasting Committee and I shall seek to emphasise the need for a form of scrutiny of parliamentary broadcasting by a Committee. In paragraphs 15.36 and 15.37, Braithwaite picks up the Ibbs report's recommendation that "within a few years" the Broadcasting Committee should be abolished and its remit given to the Administration Committee.

Since the original recommendation was made in 1990, the broadcasting of the House has become infinitely more complex, as have all the communications systems of the House. The Broadcasting Committee is at present engaged in producing a report on the future of parliamentary broadcasting in all its forms. Inevitably—this will not surprise the House—much of that future is likely to be online if we are to give the public access to the information, visually and in sound form, from this place, which we want to reach far more people than it does at present.

I do not have a particular brief to defend the Broadcasting Committee, and I concur with the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) to the extent that there is a case for placing its remit with the Information Committee,

[Mr. Roger Gale]

if that Committee's remit is to be broadened to embrace all parliamentary information. I cannot see any logic now in accepting the Ibbs recommendation to hand over the remit to the Administration Committee because the matters are too complex to be brought under that umbrella.

The point—is the only point that I want to make—is that in the course of the Broadcasting Committee's scrutiny of parliamentary broadcasting, we have all become aware of the complexities of televising the Houses of Parliament and then seeking to ensure that the information that is available is produced in a form that can be accessed by many people. At the moment, the House is failing in that because very few people actually have access, although, in theory, everybody does.

We have become aware also of the complexities of producing the signals, producing and editing the material, the nature of the restrictions on shots that are used in the House and a wealth of other considerations and arguments that do not at the moment fit neatly into the remit of any other Committee.

When the Commission considers that matter, I hope that it will take further advice from all members of the Broadcasting Committee, but that, whatever else it does, it ensures that the House of Commons retains full and proper scrutiny of the production and broadcasting of the work of the House, not just in the Chamber, but in Standing Committees, Select Committees and now in Westminster Hall.

6.28 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I wanted to speak in this debate mainly because I come into the "don't know" category that was mentioned earlier. As a new Member of Parliament, I have found it difficult to understand how the House works. Our greatest challenge is to maintain the unique features of the House while resourcing a modern democracy. I shall seek to constrain my remarks, so I shall miss out huge chunks of my prepared speech because I know that many hon. Members want to contribute.

The essential problem is highlighted in the Braithwaite report, which says:

"The House has no mission statement; Members of Parliament have no job description."

Despite that, the House is a workplace and, contrary to common opinion, MPs have an immense amount of work, so those contradictory statements shed some light on the complexity of the task.

As well as being complex, the resourcing of a Parliament impacts on the quality of democracy that emerges. That is why I wish to speak. I do not want to moan just about the fact that it is the year 2000 and I still cannot get a cappuccino in the canteen.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): That is shocking.

Ms King: It is shocking sometimes.

I want to consider what it is reasonable for MPs to expect and how the failure to meet those expectations can lessen our ability to serve our constituents. I apologise for not being an expert on the running of the House; I do not know who is responsible for what. All I know is that I believe that the system must change. I am an expert on that. As the Braithwaite report says:

"Each Member of Parliament is an expert on what he or she wants from the system, and what the system should provide."

I readily admit that, from a managerial point of view, having a client group of 659 stroppy politicians who earn a living from shooting their mouths off must be an unsavoury nightmare. Nevertheless, as a new MP, I wish to take this opportunity to say what I want from the system.

In general terms, I want an environment in which both parliamentary scrutiny and individual constituency inquiries—the two halves of our job—can be pursued, and I want an environment that saves me time. The environment in the House is not conducive to time saving. MPs are very rich in many respects, but we are paupers in terms of time. We do not have any.

In specific terms, I want to make the best use of technology. That has been an absolute and diabolical failure in the House. I have an office that is still not cabled and I find that ludicrous. If I worked in any other environment or for a company that thought of itself at the leading edge, I would have that facility. I understand that there may be good reasons for having offices that are not cabled, but surely, in the 21st century, the problems need to be overcome. Our constituents suffer as a result.

Secondly, I want to have the moderate conveniences that most of the working population take for granted. Again, a decent cup of coffee comes to mind. Although that is a trivial and irrelevant point at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, it can become a pressing problem at 3 o'clock in the morning when it is our job to scrutinise important Government Bills in a Standing Committee. Although it is always useful for MPs to be awake while they scrutinise Government legislation, I freely admit that the point that I have just made is not the most important one.

Therefore, I shall turn to the most important point. The most important thing that I want from the system is that it does not drive me out of my job as a Member of Parliament because I wish to balance my work and family life. In the past, women often found that increasingly difficult. Women do not often have a wife—a prerequisite for these jobs.

Men have similar problems, too. Any decent man, I am sure, wishes to spend time with his family. However, the work-life balance is one that every workplace and every employer must tackle. The Braithwaite report says:

"the House has to square the circle: there must be strategic planning, effective management and financial control, but in an environment which is sensitive to the needs of Members and of the House as a whole."

Until recently the "needs of Members" meant the needs of men. It is astonishing that we still do not have a creche. I have not investigated the matter recently, but do we still have a shooting gallery? That was the position when I arrived in the House, but I do not know whether it still is.

The management of the House has a responsibility to make itself receptive to elected representatives that have either family responsibilities or simply the desire to have a life. *[Interruption.]* Radical, is it not? Such a conducive environment relates to a myriad of different facilities—everything from child care to toilet and sleeping facilities. I was at the French Parliament recently. It has rooms that French Deputies can book at the beginning of an all-night

session. *[Interruption.]* I shall not comment on Conservative Members' remarks on the sleeping habits of foreign Members of Parliament.

Working hours, working days, holidays and information technology facilities are all part of a conducive environment. Some are considered by Braithwaite, but others are not. The report considers them with its managerial scope, but they are affected by a political scope, too

I shall omit everything else that I wanted to say about information technology. I acknowledge the work of the Parliamentary Communications Directorate and that great strides have been made. However, until we deal with the office cost allowance, we shall never have an effective IT department that can meet our needs.

As for the future, it is obvious that the trend is greater research work and more members of staff needing more support. Politicians must accept that they will have to give up their territorial claim over the office cost allowance if they want the House, in managerial terms, to be able to deliver the quality of IT support that we need.

We must embrace the corporate strategy and promote a corporate identity. There are many factors that militate against that, not least 659 Members of Parliament. As I have said, I am not an expert on who controls these matters; I do not have time to be. I represent 120,000 people, some of whom are among the poorest in the country. All of them live in a borough that has been recently ranked No. 1 in the deprivation index. It is my responsibility to be an expert on the solutions that make their lives easier. It is someone else's responsibility to be an expert on the solutions that make my life easier.

I do not know who these magical people are. But wherever they are in their different Committees and Departments, and whatever their different roles, most of them who have influence will hear the debate or read these words. Those of them with a determination to find solutions to service a modern democracy will overcome the disparate nature of the House of Commons decision-making procedure. They will overcome the temptation to say that it is somebody else's responsibility—it usually is—and they will also overcome the temptation to shore up the status quo. They will do all of these things so that the House can serve all its parliamentarians, even those—dare I say it—who have a life outside Parliament. Do not underestimate the importance of the task. It represents the difference between representative democracy being a slogan or a reality.

6.37 pm

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): I agree with much that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) said, but if she leaves it to unknown people on Committees to achieve the things that she wants, they will never happen. I bear the scars from the Administration Committee and the Accommodation and Works Committee during my 19 years as a member of the House of Commons Commission, I can tell the hon. Lady privately why we do not have a creche and precisely who was responsible for ensuring that we did not have one. We are talking of responsibilities that should not be left to those who lack radical passion.

My having served on the Commission for so long is probably a disqualification from taking part in the debate. I shall exculpate myself by saying that my years of service did not make me feel that we should leave everything as it is. Indeed, they were years that were marked by a constant battle to do what was said to be impossible.

It was said that it was impossible for the House to take control of the buildings in which we meet and that that was a responsibility that the Government would never relinquish. When Geoffrey Howe was Leader of the House, he decided that he wanted to appoint Sir Robin Ibbs, and it was a good idea to do so. He asked whether we would support the appointment and I said, "Only on condition that we can have the future of the buildings addressed in the Ibbs report." At that stage, the House took control of its own buildings, taking a step that it had been told it could not make.

We were told that it would be impossible for the House to introduce its own vote covering its own expenses. None the less, we do so. We have done it ever since the Ibbs report. Everything that we suggest in this area tends to be impossible until it is demonstrated that it can be done.

The Braithwaite report refers to the fact that it took six months to set up the Finance and Services Committee. Why was that? The report does not reveal the reason. In fact, it was because the Government of the day insisted that the then Leader of the House had to chair the Committee. Chairmanship could not be released into the hands of Back-Bench Members. We put up a fight and said, "No, we are not going ahead unless it is done as Ibbs said, with a Back-Bench Member doing that job." That battle was eventually won.

It is now suggested that the Member who chairs the Finance and Services Committee should be paid a salary. I remember saying at the time, "You have either to pay this person a salary or give him the best room in the building, otherwise you will never get anyone to take on the job." To be done properly, it requires a great deal of time and attention. It needs to be a priority activity. I see the post as a more important one than it has been up to now. It has not developed to the extent that Ibbs said that it should.

I see also the holder of the post can be of considerable assistance to you, Madam Speaker. Members do not always realise what a submerged iceberg of work surrounds the Speaker's role in the management of the House and in the House of Commons Commission. The Chairman of the Finance and Services Committee can be of invaluable assistance.

It is extraordinary that the minutes of domestic Committees were denied to the Braithwaite inquiry. It revealed some of the problems that we experience in relating the Commission's work to the domestic Committees. I am not surprised that the domestic Committees found it difficult to adjust to the advisory role that Ibbs recommended, and the massive turnover of Members cannot have helped. However, those involved in selecting people for ministerial posts must have regard to the need for a corpus of experienced Members on a Committee. The Commission has such a corpus, but the domestic Committees, like the Select Committee on Social Security, which my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) chairs, do not. There has almost been a total turnover of members of that Select Committee since the general election. It is impossible to run an efficient system in that way.

[Mr. A. J. Beith]

The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) pressed the case for a separate chief executive. The hon. Gentleman was the reincarnation of our former colleague John Garrett, who pressed that case for many years. I have much sympathy with him. Until recently, those who reached the post of chief executive by becoming Clerk of the House had been recruited and trained for a different role. In recent years, it has been acknowledged that those who become Clerk of the House will become chief executive. That has been reflected in the work of recent Clerks of the House.

It is not the most logical arrangement, but the alternatives do not convince me. To put it in basic terms, which the report expresses in more flowery language, why appoint two people to grade 1 jobs when one person can do both jobs? The Clerk of the House has to be of senior status because he has to defend the rights of the House against the Executive. That job cannot be downgraded. The chief executive needs to have senior status, too. I am inclined to keep the current system as long as we can make it work.

When we examine political responsibility, perhaps we should consider the bureau and quaestor systems to which the report refers. Earlier this week, I was in the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, and I noted that it had moved towards such a system—it has a formalised bureau system. Some hon. Members claim that the Speaker should not play such a demanding role in the executive management of the House, but the Scottish Parliament has established such an arrangement. My colleague, Lord Steel, who is the Presiding Officer, retains the role of Chairman of the Bureau and is recognised by all Members of the Scottish Parliament as the apex of the structure that manages the Parliament's functions. That seems to work.

Hon. Members would probably find the allocation of more individual responsibility for different activities, such as that of the Chairman of the Finance and Services Committee, easier to tackle. We could make changes to ensure that the system provides the services that hon. Members need. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) made wider suggestions, which were outside the remit of the report, for changes to the way in which we manage time. However, if we are to make some of the fundamental changes that the House needs, we would have to persuade the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and his one or two colleagues who occupied the House's time for most of the earlier part of this afternoon that there are more important things in life than taking up time.

The call upon the House's services will remain excessive until we manage time more effectively. That was outside the remit of the report, the purpose of which was to try to develop a sensible, properly accountable management structure for those who serve the House. The report is on the right lines.

6.44 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): Before I became a Member of Parliament, I was a systems analyst. Reading the Braithwaite report was therefore interesting. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) made most of the points that I intended to make, so I shall be brief. I endorse all her comments, especially those on the creche and the office allowance, which needs reform. The current allowance leads to poor research support for Members, because of the turnover and constraints.

It is crucial that our constituency offices are recognised. The Commission must take that on board, especially in relation to the IT recommendations in the report. They need to do that.

The suggestions for dealing with information technology do not take into account the speed of change. I hope that the Commission will take that on board, particularly in relation to training, support for Members and support for staff who provide support for Members.

With regard to value for money audits, at the time of the Ibbs report, that was the convention in government. Local authorities were urged to undertake value for money studies. We have since moved on to a system of best value, and the Commission should consider best value as the way forward, rather than value for money audits.

6.45 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): What depressed me when I first read the report was the statement in paragraph 23 that

"the status quo is not an option. The process of change needs support or it may falter".

The report would say that, would it not? If we ask management consultants to produce a report, they must refer to the inevitability of change because that is how they earn their living. In the context of the ghastly modernisation fetish that the House is undergoing, a report must almost inevitability refer to the benefits of change.

In the early days of the European Community, as it then was, the analogy of a bicycle was always used. We were told that, as in the case of riding a bicycle, if it did not keep moving forward, it would fall over. That was presented as the reason for the need constantly to drive forward and constantly to change, which was usually dressed up with words such as "progress", "improvement" or "modernisation".

Ms Oona King: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that change cannot help but come when, for example, the number of women Members has gone from one in 10 to one in six? Does he recognise that women have certain needs, such as child care facilities?

Mr. Forth: No. I am one of those people who is gender blind. I want neither more nor fewer women Members. The electorate decides how many there are, and the institution goes on, I hope, relatively unchanged and unaffected. I do not regard that as an issue.

Funnily enough, I did agree with one thing that the hon. Lady said. She said that one of the things that we suffer from—this may be one of the key problems of the House—is the lack of a mission statement. I use that ghastly phrase because it sums up the position reasonably well.

As I see it, the real difficulty with the way in which we in the House work is that it is not clear whether our objective is to deliver a service to the taxpayer at least cost, or whether it is to spend as much money as possible on ourselves because we are basically not accountable.

I know of little or no transparency. If, like the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley), I went round and asked the first 50 hon. Members whom I bumped into how much it cost to run this place on an annual basis, I doubt whether any would guess within £100 million a year, yet our main responsibility is supposed to be accountability to the taxpayer for what is spent at large in government. I do not detect that sense of responsibility or accountability among us as a body for what we spend on ourselves or allow, demand or encourage to be spent on us.

The report does not tackle a fundamental problem—how we see *our responsibilities* to the taxpayer being discharged in the very conduct of our business. However splendidly the Commission may work, I am not convinced—because I do not know enough about how it works—that that is in the forefront of its mind when it goes about the strategic planning that may or may not happen. Of that, I have some doubt as well. I suspect that that is where the difficulties arise.

When I turned to page 131 with a sense of excitement and looked for sharp-edged, hard-hitting, punchy recommendations, I felt somewhat let down. Frankly, it is not that impressive. There are many words and many recommendations, but I doubt whether many will be helpful. For example, we read:

"The Commission should have a high-level version of the Board of Management monthly report".

I do not know what that means. It may mean something to the people who wrote it, and I hope that it means something to the people at whom it is directed.

To state that the Finance and Services Committee

"should monitor progress towards performance targets"

is hardly profound and does not carry us much further forward. I was not immediately impressed by what I read, but hope that the recipients of the report find it more inspiring and useful than I did.

May I make a radical suggestion? Here, I belie my suspicion of change. Given that a lot of what has been said during this brief but valuable debate revolves around the fact that Members themselves are unaware of the domestic Committees and the Commission, they almost certainly do not know who sits on those Committee, what their objectives are or what they do, unless they have seen all that rising before their horrified eyes in the form of Portcullis House—£250 million, thanks very much. Apart from that, there is not much awareness among Members of what those shadowy bodies do.

That takes us to transparency and accountability, which the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow touched on. My suggestion is this: instead of appointing those Committees and the Commission in such a mysterious way, which is how much of what happens in the House works, why not elect them? Members should stand for election to the Accommodation and Works Committee, the Catering Committee and the Finance and Services Committee and issue programmes of aspirations. They could say to their colleagues, "I would like to sell off Portcullis House and give the proceeds back to the taxpayer," or, "I should like caviar to be available in the Tea Room." That would encourage accountability and a sense of purpose in the process. To answer the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush, we would know whom to talk to because we would have voted for them. There would be a direct connection between Members and those who purport to represent them and act on their behalf.

I suspect that a reason why the system does not work, as so many colleagues have said so eloquently, is that there is no connection between us—the humble punters—and those important people who do that vital work on our behalf. I make my suggestion to those who will mull over the debate and then carry us forward in the exciting, dynamic way referred to by the report. Perhaps we should bring a bit of democracy and accountability to the House of Commons. What a radical thought. We have spent some productive time today talking about the electoral process between us and our voters, of which we are all very proud and with which we are very familiar. Let us transfer that same process to the House and have a properly transparent and accountable system with electoral legitimacy. That would shake things up pretty well.

6.52 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is becoming a dangerous radical, which will obviously result in my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) being elected to take charge of the coffee-making facilities. I say to her that we should put on record our thanks to the staff of *Hansard*, the Parliamentary Communications Directorate, the Library and the Department of the Serjeant at Arms, who have radically transformed information technology in the House over the past few years.

A few months ago, I had the privilege of attending a conference in Paris with the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan). We discussed the development of IT in Parliaments with colleagues from across Europe and I am pleased to report that a good number of them asked how we were making radical steps forward such as ensuring that *Hansard* is freely available on the web to every citizen. We should develop initiatives quickly and improve facilities in such ways. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow that we need to drive forward the cabling programme, but she should reflect on the fact that we are dealing with a grade 1 historic building that includes asbestos used in post-war development. Furthermore, there are 659 Members who will not be too keen to move out of their offices when that work needs to be done.

Having said that, I want to put down a few markers to the Commission in respect of the IT work. Strategic planning has to be at the core of such activity and we have to make sure that Departments and Members understand that their IT preferences cannot drive that strategy. We must identify the desirable outcomes, and then ensure that the information technology strategy accords with them. I am afraid that, in part, we have failed to do that in past years. We have made significant progress in this Parliament and the last, but the strategy still needs to be sharpened.

For once, I entirely agree with what was said by the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), who is not present now. I believe that there is a case for strengthening the base of the Information Committee, and encompassing the functions of broadcasting. That will require careful thinking in regard to the Commission's role.

[Mr. Andrew Miller]

May I correct something that was said by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith)? Not all Committees refused the documentation to which he referred; in fact, I do not believe that the Information Committee was asked for the minutes. It would certainly have made sense to make them available, because it would have underlined the existence of a strategy.

We need to encompass the whole process of changed management throughout services in the House. However, the House must realise that, if we are to deliver the change demanded by my hon. Friends the Members for Bethnal Green and Bow and for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), we must understand the financial implications. That was one of the issues that arose in Paris. Parliaments must realise that the modernisation of their ability to communicate with the outside world will cost money. We must ensure that the public, as well as us, have confidence in the services that we have introduced.

6.57 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I believe that the House should adopt the Braithwaite report, and recommend the Commission to do so. We should implement the report as soon as possible, and we should go beyond it.

There are always arguments against change and reform, some of which we have had this evening. The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) was engaged in the endless search for perfection, and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) in, perhaps, a deliberate attempt to sabotage effectiveness. There is the loss of ancient privileges and perks; and, of course, there is the fear of the unknown. For the past 20 years, the House has swept aside such arguments when they have been advanced by local government, the national health service, the public utilities, companies and financial institutions. We would have none of that nonsense, and we should have none of it now. The fact is that we desperately need a strategic and coherent view of what is going on behind the scenes, and we have not got it.

There are many flaws and problems, most of which were identified in the Ibbs report 10 years ago. At that time, "unco-ordinated", "unaccountable" and just about every other adjective expressing derision were heaped on the running of the system. The Braithwaite report is full of diplomatic language; it wraps things up a little; but it must be said in all honesty that the shambles of 10 years ago has simply become the incomplete shambles that we have now.

There is plenty of evidence in the report to back that up. According to pages 151 and 152,

"Commission does not yet provide strategic direction"

and

"Domestic Committees continue to seek executive roles".

It goes on for page after page. It states that its recommendation for the publication of Commission minutes has not been implemented, and that there is no strategic direction. There are dozens of examples, which we all have. My favourite concerns the Annunciator and the work of the live channel: the wording is still in upper case, because, we are told, it is impossible to put lower-case print on to the screen. Goodness knows why that is so.

There are overlapping Committees. There are confused priorities. There is no one in charge. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst drew our attention to some radical suggestions, but he failed to draw attention to the fact that the Commission should set its calendar of meetings in a—

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Motion on Representation of the People Bill (Allocation of Time) and the Motion in the name of the Prime Minister for the Adjournment of the House may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

Question again proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kirkwood.]*

7.2 pm

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Speaker: Order. Just a few more Members wish to speak. It is a House of Commons matter, as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) would agree. I want to hear those Members out. It is right that we should.

Mr. Stunell: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: But I hope that Members will not take up too much of our time.

Mr. Stunell: I do not intend to. I appreciate your protection from my colleague, the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood).

We have a string of recommendations, which my hon. Friend described as the first phase, or the first tier of decisions. We should endorse that first tier and encourage him and the Commission to get on with the second tier as quickly as possible.

In all conscience, the House, having turned on every other public body and institution in the country and reformed it over the past 20 years, should be ashamed of its failure to do the same with its own institutions. We want something that is enabling, invigorating and effective, not obstructive, slow moving and ineffective. Therefore, I urge the House and the Commission to implement and to follow up on the Braithwaite report as quickly as possible.

7.1 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): As a fellow Commissioner, Madam Speaker, I propose to say little, but I know that our deliberations will have been illuminated by the debate.

I, too, compliment Michael Braithwaite and his team on the report. It required an unusual combination of skills: insight into the life of Members and the culture of Parliament; and an understanding of modern business management structures. It is a readable document, which has inspired an interesting "Second Reading" debate in the Commission.

I make six quick points. First, devising a management system for the complex business that is the House would be a major challenge in itself, but a management system that incorporates Members at the right place, with all the pressures on our time and sensitivities, requires genius. The difficulty that confronted both Ibbs and Braithwaite was how to insert into a conventional corporate management structure an essentially unconventional non-corporate person—namely, a Member of Parliament, whose predominant interests and commitments lie elsewhere.

Secondly, the report asserts that it is all or nothing. Paragraph 25 states:

"Our recommendations are an integrated package rather than a list of options."

There is a tendency for many reports to say that nowadays. I do not think that that holds true. The report contains many stand-alone recommendations, including cross-posting staff in the House from one Department to another and a foundation period for new staff. Parts 5 and 6 contain a huge number of sensible, stand-alone recommendations, which should not be held up simply because we cannot agree on the macro-reforms.

Thirdly, there are some important issues about the domestic Committees. On Tuesday, we debated an important report from the Administration Committee, to which only three of the nine members had put their name. Select Committees have difficulty with quorums and continuity of membership. The domestic Committees face an even greater problem. Absenteeism on Select Committees has increased from 25 per cent. in 1995–96 to 34 per cent. in 1998–99. The figure for the Select Committee on Education and Employment is 50 per cent. I am happy to say that the Select Committee on Modernisation, on which I sit, has an 84 per cent. attendance rate.

Members of Parliament come to Westminster to represent their constituents, to support the Government or to hold them to account, to specialise in particular policy areas that interest them and to build a political career. There is growing pressure on our time, and that is unlikely to be reversed. Members do not come to Westminster to sit on a domestic Committee. As the pressure on Members' time has mounted, they have cut back on areas that are not priorities.

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle-under-Lyme): I will not detain the House long, but the thing that concerns me about the report is its lack of clarity on what is happening to ordinary staff here. Terms and conditions of work change rapidly, yet I could not find out from the report whom, to talk to if I am concerned about someone, say, in the Tea Room who had had their conditions altered, some of the doormen, or a reduction in numbers. There does not seem to be anything in the report that explains how those matters are decided.

Sir George Young: It sounds as if the hon. Lady was one of the hon. Members interrogated by the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) and invited to say whom she would go to. The answer that was given by the hon. Gentleman was the Clerk, who will, if not answer the question himself, at least route it in the right direction. However, she has made the point that there is lack of clarity about the management structure.

Against the background of the problem of the domestic Committees, I found it a bold recommendation that we should retain them.

Fourthly, I think that that raises a broader question about an alternative career structure in the House—which recognises that becoming a Minister is not the only way of serving; which recognises that, if Parliament is to do its job properly, it is important to have on both sides of the House hon. Members who do not want to become Ministers; and which recognises the contributions of those hon. Members. Although that takes us beyond this debate, I believe that, if such a structure existed, it would make it easier to deal with some of the problems identified by Braithwaite.

Fifthly, and penultimately, there is the proposal to make the Finance and Services Committee, which is composed entirely of hon. Members, the Commission's executive committee. The criticism of the domestic Committees was that they acted in executive mode, not policy mode. The proposals for the Finance and Services Committee run the risk of magnifying that problem—of muddling up policy and services.

As for paragraph 4.21, I am not sure that these are the right tasks for members. One of them is

"to carry out individual tasks delegated to it by the Commission".

That is meant to be done by members of the Finance and Services Committee, which includes the Leader of the House and the two Deputy Chief Whips. I wonder whether it is really their job to run the Commission's executive missions. Indeed, it seems that the problem is that the Finance and Services Committee, as described in Braithwaite, becomes rather close to the Board of Management.

Finally, I should like to say a word on the Commission. Paragraph 4.6 reminds us of what Ibbs hoped that the Commission would do. The report tactfully suggests that we have not lived up to expectations, and I agree. However, I have some difficulty with the paragraph that asserts that the Commission is of the right size. It consists of the Speaker and five Members, many of whom are doing many other things—not least, of course, Madam Speaker.

It is worth considering the option of a larger Commission, not least because paragraph 15.10 envisages the Commission doing more work. If we had a larger Commission, it would give breadth and depth to our discussion, and we are rather light on newer and younger members.

With those initial thoughts, I welcome the report and look forward to taking forward its implementation with my fellow Commissioners.

7.7 pm

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): It might be useful if I, as Chairman of the Information Committee, were to share with the House some of the Committee's views on the report. Many of the matters that we cover are matters of great concern to hon. Members, and today's debate has reinforced that view in my mind. I should like to try to explain how the Committee sees our role in the context of Braithwaite and of some of the points made in the debate.

We certainly believe that the information technology infrastructure will be increasingly important in the House. We now have more than 300 hon. Members on our

[Mr. Richard Allan]

network, and, very importantly, more than 1,000 Members' staff. The vast majority of hon. Members offices are connected, even when certain Members are not using e-mail daily.

The Library facilities changed dramatically and very successfully under the previous Librarian. The facilities will continue changing in that manner, and they are one of the major points of interface for hon. Members with staff of the House. Library staff are used daily by hon. Members, and the Committee could provide valuable input in that relationship.

As for the public interface, we have the *Official Report* and all the work that its staff do, and the website, which provides a growing public interface. The role of the website needs to be examined, and we require policy input from hon. Members.

As the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) said, as the media change, it would be useful to bring together some of the broadcast functions. In terms of policy, the content that we are making available on web television, the internet and normal television could usefully be brought together. The Information Committee would perhaps not want a role in determining the rules of parliamentary broadcasting, as those could perhaps be best determined elsewhere, but we could play a role in their implementation.

The Committee also acts as a force in putting issues on the agenda. In response to the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), the Committee regrets that the entire estate is not cabled. However, we act as a force in making it clear that, as a matter of policy, the offices of all hon. Members should be cabled. We do not want the executive role of implementing that policy, and it is certainly up to others to decide whether the money is available and how the policy is implemented. Our Committee does not want to interfere in day-to-day work, but we want to give a clear steer to officers. I hope that they appreciate our clear steers, such as our wish for the offices of every Member of Parliament to be cabled.

To respond to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White), let me sat that we are also putting on the agenda the issue of linking all constituency offices to the network. We recognise how Members of Parliament now work. They might want their constituency staff and their support staff in the House to access their diary system. Officers have got that message clearly from us. That would not happen if there were no Committee to go through the issues.

Mr. Miller: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Committee would also like to ensure that the connection to constituency offices is made at no cost to Members?

Mr. Allan: Our Committee holds that view; it is for others to decide. We are not allowed to go into the office costs allowance, although we continually touch on it. We are a group of Members of Parliament in a formal setting who are interested in the subject, and that is the view that we are putting forward. Without the strength that that formal structure gives the argument, we might lose something. I am not engaging in special pleading for me or for the Committee; I am merely pointing out that the structure has a valuable role. That is down to the membership of the Committee.

Domestic Committees sometimes have an unfair reputation. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) is one of the star performers on the Committee, but there are many others who come along on a Tuesday afternoon for very little recompense. They get actively involved in letting officers know what Members of Parliament want. That would not happen with a user group or a less formal structure, when only people with complaints would come. Complaints have to get through, but it is important to have a group of people who are actively involved in policy formulation. I am pleased that members of my Committee are able to do that with the dedication that they show.

Ms Oona King: Many Members of Parliament want IT support. Has the Committee considered that? In any other company that I have worked for, if my computer broke down, I could contact someone who would fix it. I find it astonishing that, as a British Member of Parliament in the 21st century, if my computer breaks down, I have no recourse.

Mr. Allan: This morning, I was speaking with a senior officer from the Parliamentary Communications Directorate about the possibility of setting up a Members' support service. That is on the agenda and a report will be produced. We welcome any input on that.

We are looking for a clearer line of accountability with the Commission. That many also help other domestic Committees. We would like the Commission to come to us with its ideas and ask us, as a group of IT and information specialists, to give our views and do some of the work that it cannot do, because its members do not want to don anoraks and go into such detail. We would also like to have a proactive role and be able to ask the Commission for permission to investigate ideas that have come from Members, such as the radical thought of wanting to use computers in Committee Rooms. Braithwaite recommends clearer two-way communication. We believe that we have such a role, but we would like greater clarity.

We welcome Braithwaite's reference to a formal statement of costs and benefits. We are not responsible for the detailed budget setting, but we can give a view on whether a proposal is good value for money. As specialists, relatively speaking, we can say whether an idea will provide value for money in the service that it will deliver in a way that the Commission might find difficult. We entirely accept that implementation is down to officers, but we believe that we can act as a useful sounding board and a source of ideas and feedback from Members.

We accept that Departments should move to a corporate approach on IT. That has been a problem, but we have had a good example recently of how it can work. The IT convergence strategy and the Y2K issue brought all the Departments of the House and all the IT specialists together. The staff of the House are to be congratulated on their success. That should also be a pointer to how we move forward. Indeed, Braithwaite suggests that we move in that direction.

It is useful to put on record the two small points on which we disagree with the Braithwaite recommendations. He suggests, first, that domestic Committees no longer have specialist advisers. My Committee uses an academic with strong IT expertise. It would feel the lack of any

external expert advice. When the issue is considered further, we hope that our particular requirement for expertise will be borne in mind.

The second point was a suggestion that no departmental paper should come to a domestic Committee before being approved by the Board of Management. We feel that we have a useful role in seeing things early. When something is to be implemented, it should go through the Board of Management, and we do not want to interfere with that executive role. However, we feel that Departments such as the Library should be able to bring things to us at an early stage and get some views before finalising a paper to go to the Board of Management.

With those two exceptions noted, I can say that we feel that the report is a positive way forward. We exist as a group of Members who are keen to respond to exactly the kind of demands that we have had today, to implement them and to bring forward excellent information systems to serve Parliament. We would welcome a clearer relationship with the Commission to achieve that, and I hope that Braithwaite will give us the kind of structure in which we can work. Hopefully, services can continue to improve, as I believe that they have improved dramatically under the excellent offices of recent years.

7.16 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): When I was the Minister responsible for privatising the Property Services Agency, I had the discussions with Sir Robin Ibbs that led to the Ibbs report. The recommendations in the Braithwaite report are rather woolly. It is an informative report, but it is not clear whether the recommendations are as crisp as I would wish.

Robin Ibbs was keen to emphasise the importance of value for money, and made recommendations about a lot of value-for-money studies. This report makes it clear that those studies were never really carried out. That is gravely disappointing because, if anyone in this country should be keen on establishing their belief in value for money, it should be this House of Commons. We take it upon ourselves to criticise Government Departments, Ministers and the public sector for the use and priorities of taxpayers' money, and yet it seems that we are still lax in scrutinising our own expenditure.

The report says that the Members of this House are, in effect, 659 small businesses. One thing is certain—if we were, we would know a lot more about our costs than we do. We would know, for example, what the cost of office accommodation for our secretariat was per square foot. We do not know that and, as we know, if one cannot measure it, one cannot control it. I would like to see more transparency and accountability.

The report asks what will happen when somebody gives in to the pressure for the office costs allowance to increase. It may mean that people will take on more staff, with more demand for accommodation in the centre of Westminster in one of the most expensive office environments in the world. What can we do about that?

I would suggest that the costs of Members' office staff accommodation should be included within the office costs allowance. I suspect that, if hon. Members were given an allowance for office costs to include accommodation for secretaries, research assistants and so on, many would decide that it was more economical to employ those people in their constituencies, as the labour and accommodation costs are lower. At the moment, all the incentives are the other way, and all the pressure is to have the extra staff employed in or around Westminster.

Mr. Forth: I would not want to undermine my hon. Friend's argument, but he should bear in mind that, as ever, London Members are an exception to that. I hope that he recognises that fact.

Mr. Chope: I am sure that, if the recommendation were to be taken further, a special case could be made for London Members. However, Members with constituencies like mine—about 100 miles away—will agree that, if I employ a secretary in my constituency, the office accommodation costs, the costs of the photocopier, the costs of the photocopier paper and the costs of the telephone calls and faxes all have to be borne out of my office costs allowance. That is one of the reasons why many Members choose to employ staff at Westminster. If we increase the office costs allowance, and that results in an increase in the number of staff employed by Members, who then expect that those staff should be accommodated at Westminster, there will be no limit on expenditure in the future. If we want a rational approach to dealing with that, perhaps the Commission should consider the method of transparency and accountability that I have suggested.

My final point is a request for information. I do not know how the space in the Press Gallery is paid for. Do the individual newspapers pay for it on a per square foot basis? Who pays for the telephone calls and is there any control over them? If any service is freely available, the temptation always exists to abuse it. In the debate earlier in the week, we discussed subsidising the Line of Route to the tune of £200,000 or more. If we are that strapped for cash, we could start by charging for some of the space that is occupied in the Palace. We could then pay for the Line of Route without undertaking the convoluted process that we discussed on Tuesday night. The idea proposed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), that we should allow free access to this place to members of the public, might be possible on cost grounds if we recovered costs from users of the building who do not contribute at the moment.

Sir George Young: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I understand that the Government have been defeated by 96 votes in a vote on the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill in the other place. The Leader of the House in the other place has said that the Bill is now damaged irretrievably. She has also said that the Home Secretary will make the Government's position clear. Have you received any indication from the Home Secretary that he plans to do that and, if the Leader of the House of Lords has announced that the Bill is to be re-introduced in the House of Commons, should not that announcement have been made here, not in the other place?

Madam Speaker: I have had no information from the other place about the legislation there. Unfortunately, people do not give me information about what is happening in the other place and I tend to have to wait until I read the *Official Report* the next day. I take the

[Madam Speaker]

point that the right hon. Gentleman makes, but I have not been informed by the Home Secretary that he seeks to make any statement to the House this evening.

Mr. Beith: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. The Leader of the House is represented here and could surely throw some light on what the Government propose to do.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. I hope that this is a point of order, because I will not allow a debate.

Mr. Tipping: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Is it the precedent of the House to have a statement every time the Government are defeated in the House of Lords? If it were, we would not have much time for our own discussions.

Madam Speaker: Does the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) wish to wind up the debate?

7.23 pm

Mr. Kirkwood: Thank you, Madam Speaker. With the leave of the House, I feel a duty to make a brief response to the comments that have been made. I have found this an interesting and useful debate, and my fellow Commissioners will wish to study with great care what has been said.

The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) mentioned confusion, and it is true that some confusion exists. That is unacceptable, and we are determined to do something about it. As the Commissioner who answers questions on the Floor of the House, I am delighted to be asked oral or written questions, but I cannot stimulate them myself. I do not know what questions hon. Members have. The hon. Gentleman said that he was disappointed that he got such a negative response to the rather nebulous question that he posed to his sample of Members. The answer to his question, and for any hon. Member who is confused about where to seek information, is the Commission's annual report, which is a very thorough document. It deals Department by Department with where responsibility lies and it is updated every year. It is an encyclopaedia of information. If anyone wishes to find out anything about this place, they need only take it home to read in bed.

Mr. Forth: I shall do so tonight.

Mr. Kirkwood: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman does.

The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush did not stray far from the general thrust of the report when he suggested that someone should take charge. However, he is confusing a strategic corporate officer who would set a framework within which the whole organisation could work with a customer complaints manager. That issue is dealt with fully in appendix G of the report. If the Clerk of the House were given the support that the report recommends, he would have it in his power to make arrangements for the appointment of the equivalent of a customer services manager.

I do not think that there is a gulf between the hon. Gentleman and me. The Leader of the House noted that a person brought in from the private sector who was used to employing normal management practices would not last very long in this place. The House has a federal structure, with Chinese walls between Departments. There are also important questions of departmental independence, but the tone of the report is that we should move more quickly than has been the case so far towards a corporate structure. If we adopt that recommendation, and give the Clerk of the House the support that the report suggests, I hope that some of the problems that have been identified will be resolved.

Mr. Soley: I agree that the gap between the hon. Gentleman and me is not that great. However, his arguments about Chinese walls and so on reminded me of the arguments used in hospitals and elsewhere to prevent the introduction of chief executives. We are in danger of repeating that error.

My point is that adopting the structure set out in the report carries the danger that the Clerk of the House would become more of a manager, and less of a Clerk. To let that happen would be to lose something very valuable.

Mr. Kirkwood: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that danger, but it is not one that frightens me. If the corporate structure evolves and is properly serviced, one person may end up—in the fullness of time and once people have experience of working in different departments—with the primary management role. In a proper, evolved corporate structure, it is entirely possible that someone other than the Clerk of the House could become the primus inter pares. That is envisaged in the report, although I accept that we must be careful about how we get to that stage, and that doing so will take some time.

Although I do not think that there is a lot of difference between the hon. Gentleman and me, I undertake to ensure that his comments are studied and considered.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) is going to be in great demand for service on just about every domestic Committee. Her plea for better use of her time was irresistible, and I absolutely agree with her. I believe that the new intake of hon. Members has made a positive difference to the House. From the point of view of the Commission, I can tell the hon. Lady that the new intake's approach is beginning to percolate through the House in a very positive manner, and I hope that she will be encouraged by that.

It is a shame that the hon. Lady is not wired up. I shall speak to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), who is not without influence in such matters. I hope that an electrician with a box of wires will appear in her office quite soon.

The report states that the number of parliamentary data and video network accounts has increased by more than 1,000, or 49 per cent., since December 1997, and that the number of Members of both Houses, and their staff, with PDVN accounts has increased by 115 per cent. since December 1997. Those accounts have to be managed, and we have to find the money to pay for that. Staff are

working their socks off to make sure that demand is met, and I am delighted at the support that has been received for the work that is done.

The Commission is aware of the problems. We know that we are not responding fast enough and that there is a long way to go, but we are trying to get there. I hope that the hon. Lady will find some reassurance in the report.

I have to tell the hon. Lady that the Commission can do nothing about the rifle range, which does not belong to the House of Commons. In any case, it could be used as a creche only for children who were long and thin, who were prepared to stay in order and run in an absolutely straight line. The rifle range in fact belongs to the staff: the heritable property of the House does not belong to the Commission.

The Commission is doing its best to build on the very popular staff scheme for child care. Every 18 months or two years, the Commission asks staff about their child care voucher scheme, and they tell us that they are very happy with it. We accept that there is a need to provide such services, and the Commission is doing everything that it can in that respect.

However, I can tell the hon. Lady that everything that she said is in line with the general thrust of what Braithwaite is trying to do. I take her speech as a stern warning that, if we do not do better, faster, we will have her to reckon with in future, and quite right, too.

I am always grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). I learned a lot from him—he was my predecessor on the Commission, and I look forward to picking his brains in the Tea Room at much greater length. I was grateful to his remarks, which added to the debate.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) talked about the office costs allowance. This might seem perverse, but we have no control over it. I want people to understand that. It is right that, if it were increased by 10 per cent. tomorrow, it would exponentially increase the demand to which our works and administration budget would have to respond. If hon. Members want to influence that, they must make their own representations to the Senior Salaries Review Body. A lot of positive work is done; collective group purchasing is available on the PDVN, and that is a welcome step forward. At the next election, there will be a marvellous opportunity—if the will is there and people who feel strongly about this make their representations in the right way, we might get something done positively in the next Parliament, but I do not think that it will be much before then.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) does not know the cost of running the House of Commons. Page 14 of the annual report gives the figures—it has pie charts, so even the right hon. Gentleman might be able to understand. It has percentages and little coloured graphs.

Mr. Forth: What is the figure?

Mr. Kirkwood: The administration vote is £85.3 million. The work services vote is £99.6 million. Taking the office costs member vote into account, the total running costs for last year were £273.9 million. That includes quite a lot of capital expenditure for Portcullis House. We cannot build that fast enough either, but the Braithwaite report does not deal with Portcullis House.

I do not know where the right hon. Gentleman has been for—

Mr. Forth: 16 years.

Mr. Kirkwood: It seems longer to some of us. We elect the membership of these Committees. There are motions late at night, when sometimes even the right hon. Gentleman is in his place. These motions are amendable and debatable.

Mr. Miller: Do not tell him.

Mr. Kirkwood: I have given the game away, and we are now in for many more hard and long nights. These names are all approved by the House. We could delete one name and add another, and eventually end up with a debate. I think that that answers the right hon. Gentleman's question.

I was grateful for the support that the PDVN received from various hon. Members. I was grateful, too, for the comments of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). I look forward to working with him to take this process forward.

My hon. Friends the Members for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) and for Hallam both made important points but, again, broadly supported the thrust of the report. I look forward to talking to them informally.

Finally, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) is a very brave man if he tells his local and regional press sees that there are moves afoot in the House of Commons to start charging their editors to get copy from the Press Gallery.

Mr. Chope: I am certainly not going to have my remarks misrepresented in that way. I suggested that there should be a charge per square foot for the office accommodation used by members of the press.

Mr. Kirkwood: I was teasing the hon. Gentleman. It is an important point. I was astonished when I discovered the extent of the facilities up there. We had a look in the previous Parliament and were so horrified by the facilities that we spent a lot of money trying to improve fire safety and other health and safety measures. [HON. MEMBERS: "Why?"] That is a good question.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will be looking in every corner of the estate to try to make the place more efficient in a way that is properly costed and transparent for all our constituents.

This has been a valuable debate and, as a Commissioner, I feel that it has given us something to work on. I have assured hon. Members that we will ensure that progress will be reported religiously and transparently in full consultation. All the points made today will be carefully considered, and we hope to make progress quickly and in a way that people fully understand and can respond to as they think appropriate. Without more ado, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

DISQUALIFICATIONS BILL

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Disqualifications Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

COMMITTEES

Public Administration

Ordered,

That Mr. Peter Bradley be discharged from the Select Committee on Public Administration and Mr. David Lepper be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Dowd]*

Modernisation of the House of Commons

Ordered,

That Mr. David Drew be discharged from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and David Taylor be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

PETITION

Food Labelling

7.36 pm

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): I am pleased to present and support a petition raised by my local National Farmers Union, which has been signed by more than 2,000 of my constituents.

It declares:

The labelling of food is currently confusing and misleading.

The petitioner therefore requests the House of Commons to urge the Minister to introduce legislation at the earliest opportunity so that only produce which originates in Britain can be labelled as British, thereby allowing consumers who want to buy British the freedom to do so.

To lie upon the Table.

Parliamentary Bills

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

7.36 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) earlier referred to impossible battles, and I shall try to take one on. I am indebted to the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) for his comments on Second Reading of the Electronic Communications Bill. I worry about being so heartily in agreement with a member of the Tory party, but it happens sometimes. I should also put on the record our debt to the House of Lords for debating the matter of plain English several times. I acknowledge the help of the Plain English Campaign, which, since this debate appeared on the Order Paper, has given me some interesting material.

We should start by asking whose interests we serve. In every sphere of life, in government and business, we are moving from being a producer-oriented society to being one in which users and consumers come first. It is unfortunate that Parliament lags behind. The interests of our constituents should be the primary focus when we draft legislation. A myth exists that some language is "right" and some "wrong". In truth, language evolves. For example, there is currently an interesting debate about Spanish as Hispanics in the United States of America are changing the language. Language changes.

My main concern is legalese language that is difficult to understand. By that, I mean such things as unnecessary technical terms, the impersonal style of Bills, twisted word orders, needless repetition or elaboration, unhelpful layout, long sentences, use of double negatives, use of passive verbs rather than active ones and so on. I want to deal with several different areas in this debate.

First, I propose that we have a purpose clause in every Bill. Secondly, we should review legislation as much as pass new legislation. Thirdly, we should tackle the issue of non-sexist language in Bills. Fourthly, we need to use plain English in legislation, particularly statutory instruments.

I am a member of the Select Committee on Public Administration, which considered the Freedom of Information Bill. It was suggested that the Bill should have a purpose clause, as has been proposed on several other occasion. Nearly every time, such clauses were rejected as setting a precedent. It is not conventional to include them. Occasionally, as in the case of the Children Acts, purpose clauses have been accepted but, in discussions on whether a Bill needs one, we are usually told, "We don't want to do it in this Bill because that's not the way it is generally done."

Every Bill should have a purpose clause. Some people will point out that, since Pepper *v.* Hart, Ministers' comments can be taken into account. However, as Lord Lester, who gave evidence to the Select Committee, pointed out, that would be true only when the wording in the Bill is unclear. Only then would the court resort to Pepper *v.* Hart.

A purpose clause in every Bill would not only explain the intentions of the Bill, but guard against unforeseen implications and prevent the semantic errors that dog so

much of our legislation. It would make the intentions of Ministers clear to the courts in any subsequent arguments over interpretation and enhance our legislation.

One of the things that we do well in this place is pass legislation; its quantity is testimony to that. However, we rarely review it. When we do so, it is either after a change of Government or because there is a crisis or uproar. The Child Support Agency is a classic example; we reviewed it because it was not working. There were problems, pressure built up and we had to reform it. In other cases, the review is in response to rulings from the European Court—as has happened in the case of the armed forces legislation—or to European directives.

In America, sunset clauses in Bills have become popular. I support them in certain circumstances; they can play a valuable role. The inclusion of such a clause in the Electronic Communications Bill is a useful innovation. We need to build a quality review process into every piece of legislation and to ensure that, as times change, the purpose of the Bill changes with them. Too often, circumstances change, but legislation fails to catch up.

The Select Committee on Deregulation has a role to play in that matter. The Committee could consider legislation and initiate changes through its procedures. I urge the Minister, in his review of the Committee, to consider that matter. I realise that the Law Commission examines legislation. I do not suggest the replacement of its role; I want a political review rather than the technical one that it necessarily undertakes.

I find the use of sexist language in our legislation hard to stomach. When I entered local government in the 1980s and when I was growing up in the trade union movement, there were battles about the use of sexist language. Those battles are over. In business, in local government—even in the local pub—people manage to talk in non-sexist language; it has become the norm. The one matter where we have not caught up is in the drafting of Bills.

I fully expect the forces of conservatism to continue to use offensive and degrading language. Some hon. Members would be quite prepared to use it deliberately. However, we should not have to acquiesce in that practice. It is important that Bills are written so as to avoid the use of "he" in references to a man or woman. For example, clause 10 of the Electronic Communications Bill contains the words

"the Director shall not make any modification unless . . . he has considered every representation made to him about the modification".

Why cannot we say that

"the Director shall not make any modification unless representations about the modification have been considered"?

We do not need to use the word "he" in that context.

I am not worried if the odd bit of sexist language slips through. My point relates to the use of language and the cultural change that is needed, not to the requirements of narrow political correctness. However, we desperately need to address the issue.

If we expect people to follow the law, it is important that they understand it. I hope that I am a reasonably intelligent person, but, if I have to read every Bill three or four times before I understand it, there really is something wrong. Acts of Parliament should not just be for lawyers and MPs. That difficulty in understanding legislation is a problem for our democracy.

An example occurred this week when the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments was considering a regulation on the working families tax credit, which is one of the best measures that the Government have introduced, and which has helped many people. The tax credit is paid through employers. S.I. No. 3219 details how it should be paid and in what circumstances. The Committee Clerk could not understand a particular part of the regulation. If someone as eminent as a Clerk can misunderstand such a crucial piece of legislation, which is the cornerstone of the Government's policy to help people out of poverty, what hope has a small business man or woman of understanding it?

We use pre-legislative scrutiny a great deal now; it is becoming the norm. I welcome that innovation. Part of the consultation process ought to be to submit every draft Bill to the Plain English Campaign. The aim should be to ensure that as many Bills as possible get a crystal mark, although certain technical Bills might not be able to achieve it. I understand that the Scottish Parliament would have achieved that mark recently, but for a few minor points.

In Canada, the Uniform Law Conference's drafting conventions say:

"An Act should be written simply, clearly and concisely, with the required degree of precision, and as much as possible in ordinary language".

If there were any Tory Members here, I would upset them with my next quote because even the European Union guidelines say that

"the wording of an Act should be clear, simple, concise and unambiguous".

The use of technological terminology should be appropriate, and Acts should not include redundant or archaic words and phrases.

I accept that change is not the easy option. It would be easier to continue with jargon, legalese and convention. I recognise that it is hard to achieve precision, clarity and ease of understanding and that Parliamentary drafters would have to do a lot more thinking. However, it does not help legislation if we produce Bills with 127-word sentences and excessive detail. That leads to complexity, obscurity and uncertainty.

The Freedom of Information Bill states:

"Where, on making his request for information, the applicant expresses a preference for communication by any one or more of the following means, namely

(a) the provision to the applicant of a copy of the information in permanent form or in another form acceptable to the applicant",

when the applicant is simply asking for a copy of a record.

The Irish Freedom of Information Act says:

"A head may give access under this Act to a record providing the requestor with

(a) A copy of the record".

The Australian Act says:

"Access to a document may be given to a person in one or more of the following forms . . .

(c) Provision by an agency of Government of a copy of the document".

That is simple and everybody understands it. Why do we need to make it unnecessarily complex and ensure, through the tautology of language, that people do not understand what we are asking them to do?

[Mr. Brian White]

The British Bill has 86 clauses and seven schedules; the Irish Act has 48 clauses and three schedules. By making our legislation unnecessarily complex, we do a disservice to our democracy by placing citizens at the mercy of the bureaucratic state and by making it easier for people to make the legitimate excuse that they did not understand what we were asking of them.

There is a myth that plain English is not legally accurate, but that has been steadily and repeatedly shattered. In the United States, 44 states have some form of requirement for plain English, and there has never been a case in which a contract has been declared less legally valid because of the use of the plain English.

We need to replace the long sentences, the verbiage and the countless double negatives. I do not understand why we have to frame legislation in negative terms. We should replace the old formalities with concise, simple, familiar and precise language.

Nowhere is that more important than in statutory instruments. Last year, we produced more than 3,000 statutory instruments. Why do we need to dot all the i's and cross all the t's? We need a third way of regulation. The laissez-faire of let it rip should not apply and neither should we nail down everything to say how a particular regulation should be implemented. We should set the objective of the regulation, but not necessarily worry about how people achieve it. We should set the way forward. That is a true third way for regulations.

At present, 60 statutory instruments go through each meeting of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and consideration of them lasts for about 30 minutes. That shows how much attention is given to them. Unless they are made much clearer and the scrutiny is made much better, our system of checks and balances will be lost.

We have started to modernise government, but I recognise that there is a long way to go. Although I do not expect the Minister to wave a magic wand—but if anyone could do that, he could—and accept everything that I say, I seek a commitment from the Government that they will consider the issues. I hope that they will examine purpose clauses, the language of Bills and review the way that we legislate.

In 1997, the Prime Minister said that we had been elected as new Labour and that we intended to govern as new Labour. I think that he has been true to his word. In fact, the Plain English Campaign said that its finest hour was when the Lord Chancellor introduced the Access to Justice Act 1999, which ended Latin usage in the courts. If we can do that in government—we are doing really well with thousands of documents and White Papers—why cannot we do it in legislation? Let us have a third pillar and start to legislate as new Labour with plain language.

7.52 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Graham Stringer): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) on securing this important debate. It is highly appropriate that my hon. Friend, who did so much to secure the future of the material on which Acts of Parliament are written and stored, should turn his considerable energies and intelligence to considering what is written on the vellum.

I have much sympathy, as do the public, with my hon. Friend's points, and I shall try to answer them in the order in which he raised them. If I fail to deal with them all, I shall write to him.

By "purpose clauses" people sometimes mean guiding principles for interpreting the text, and sometimes statements of principle on which the detail of legislation is based. In either case, the statements are intended to have legal effect. It is wrong to think that using those techniques in all Bills would be an advance; they would often create confusion.

Guiding principles may be open to interpretation in many ways. The result is vague law: citizens cannot know with any certainty how the law affects them in their particular circumstances. That approach can have a place, but it must be used with the utmost caution.

With statements of principle, the problem is duplication. There is a real risk of inconsistency between statements of principle and the detailed provisions of an Act, because the same thing is said twice in different words. That can create a dilemma in deciding where the balance lies between the general principle and the specific rule, and which of them matters most in specific circumstances. Those views have been taken by successive Governments and are supported by the two main modern reports on the law-making process—the Renton report of 1975 and the Hansard Society report of 1992.

Both types of material have their uses, and examples can be found in various Acts in recent years. There are good reasons not to include such statements in Acts as a routine practice, but we shall continue to use the techniques where it is helpful to do so.

It is highly desirable that the purpose of a Bill be explained, but it should be explained alongside the legislation and not in the legislation itself. As part of the modernisation programme, the Government took up a proposal by the Office of Parliamentary Counsel for explanatory notes and introduced them from the beginning of last Session. They are published alongside Bills and are available to the general public from the Stationery Office and on the internet. They are prepared when the Bill is first introduced; revised when the Bill enters its Second House; and revised again when the Bill receives Royal Assent.

The new notes do not form part of the Bill and do not claim to be authoritative or to have received Parliament's approval.

Mr. White: Does my hon. Friend accept that some explanatory notes have caused problems for those seeking to understand them, or have simply repeated what is in the Bill? There is much that we could learn about improving them as we go forward.

Mr. Stringer: I am not aware of those examples, although I would be prepared to examine them and to respond to them.

The freedom is there to use techniques that cannot be used in Bills. The notes can explain the background to a measure; they can give worked examples; and they can explain difficult concepts by setting them out in different ways. All that makes the law easier to grasp. The notes are still in their infancy, but the initial reaction has been encouraging.

The next issue is the regular review of legislation, to which the Government give high priority. Such review is essential to change and modernisation. Without a change in the law, many policies could not be implemented. As my hon. Friend mentioned the Law Commission, which regularly reviews the law, I will not go into the detail of the programme that it undertakes.

The Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 provides for the repeal of statutory provisions in the interests of deregulation, by an order made after consultation and after parliamentary consideration of the proposal. As hon. Members will know, the Government will be bringing forward legislation to widen the scope of this power.

My hon. Friend may feel that more could be done, and I would not disagree with him in principle. However, parliamentary and departmental resources are always at a premium, and the price of more weeding out of obsolete law would be the sacrifice of new legislation, which is often needed urgently.

My hon. Friend spoke of the need for gender-free language in legislation. I congratulate the good burghers of Milton Keynes on having public houses that are free of sexist language. I look forward to visiting Milton Keynes to witness this extraordinary phenomenon.

The issue is covered by section 6 of the Interpretation Act 1978, which ensures that courts and others give legislation a gender-free interpretation, whether or not the words in the legislation are gender free. If "he or she" is meant, that is how the Act will be interpreted, whether or not the text of an Act uses "he" or "she". Users of legislation, whether they are men or women, have not found the convention confusing. The use of "he or she" and other phrases to overcome the objection to the use of "he" alone adds a complication which is bound on occasion to make the meaning of a provision less easy to ascertain.

As my hon. Friend suggests, there will frequently be ways round the problem, such as the repetition of a noun or the use of the plural, or the use of an alternative gender-neutral word, where one exists. It is inevitable, however, that there will remain some occasions when a provision will be less simple, and therefore less clear, if the drafter must take account of objectives other than legal accuracy and clarity.

Let me offer an example. The Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 inserted a new part into the Employment Rights Act 1996, to protect workers from detriment when making a disclosure which is in the public interest. Section 43G(2) includes the words:

"that, at the time he makes the disclosure, the worker reasonably believes that he will be subjected to a detriment by his employer if he makes a disclosure to his employer".

If "he" is replaced with "he or she", the provision reads:

"that, at the time he or she makes the disclosure, the worker reasonably believes that he or she will be subjected to a detriment by his or her employer if he or she makes a disclosure to his or her employer".

That is less clear, if non-sexist. The use of masculine pronouns could be avoided without loss of simplicity by using feminine pronouns instead. I do not know whether all those who object to the present system would regard that as satisfactory, but from the drafter's point of view, it would be equally effective.

Clarity is enhanced if the policy underlying legislation is straightforward. The Human Rights Act 1998 has been praised for its clarity. It represents legislation in a new field where there was no accumulation of statute and case law that the drafter had to take into account. However, legislation on a complicated topic is bound to be complex.

Even for simple policies, the law sometimes has to be set out in considerable detail. As the Renton report stated in 1975:

"the draftsman—

the word "draftsperson" could have been used in 1975—

"must never be forced to sacrifice certainty for simplicity, since the result may be to frustrate the legislative intention. An unfortunate subject may be driven to litigation because the meaning of an Act was obscure which could, by the use of a few extra words, have been made plain."

My hon. Friend asked why there was so much detail in legislation, especially in statutory instruments. There are two elements to the answer. First, there is a need for certainty in legislation, even if that means detail. Leaving matters to be decided by the courts on the basis of broad objectives would mean that people could not know, perhaps for many years, how legislation applied to their specific circumstances. Secondly, much of the detail in statutory instruments covers administrative matters, which it would not be reasonable to expect courts to decide. For example, when a permit scheme is established, it would not be sensible to expect the courts to determine what information an applicant should provide.

The explanatory notes that I mentioned in the context of purpose clauses are also a step forward in making legislation easier to read. Explanatory material cannot be included in legislation without the risk of affecting its meaning and giving rise to arguments in the courts. However, the explanatory notes that accompany Bills and Acts make them far easier to understand.

Before leaving the topic, I want to respond to the comparisons that my hon. Friend made between the Freedom of Information Bill and similar measures in Australia and Ireland. Clause 10 appears more complicated because it grants a right of access to information recorded in any form rather than simply to specific documents or records. The provision not only lists the forms in which information may be provided but sets out rules for deciding whether the public authority is obliged to provide access in the form requested by the applicant. For example, it establishes rules to determine whether the public authority can insist on providing a photocopy when the applicant wants the information on disk. The Irish and Australian Acts also contain rules for the same purpose, but they appear later in the measures and my hon. Friend did not quote them. A true comparison with Australian legislation requires examination of section 20 in the Australian measure, which runs to a page. Our clause 10 is more compact, more conveniently arranged, and thus easier to follow.

It is because of the importance of the issues raised by my hon. Friend that I have gone into so much detail. The issue can be expressed quite succinctly: the essential need in legislation is law which is certain and which delivers the policy intention that underlies it.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes past Eight o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 January 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Objective 1 Funding

Motion made, and question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

10 am

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I welcome this opportunity to debate a subject of great importance to the four regions.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Given that the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) expects the Minister to reply and that no Minister is present, is it appropriate to continue?

Mr. Deputy Speaker : There is no question of order about who is present. It is entirely a matter of courtesy to the proceedings that a Minister be present. [*Interruption.*] The Minister is now here.

Mr. George: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am delighted that the Minister is now present for a debate of extreme importance for the four regions that have won objective 1 status. So much depends on our work in this Chamber, and on our work with colleagues in the European Commission and our partners in these four poorest regions of the United Kingdom. We must make the most of this opportunity, because it is the best in our lifetime that these regions will have to pull themselves up.

I congratulate all those involved in securing objective 1 status for the four regions, including the Government, Members of Parliament, Members of the European Parliament, councils and campaigners. Above all, I congratulate the people of the regions who have continued their work, often in the knowledge that little or no heed was paid to their poverty. The people of Cornwall are used to being envied for their environment, their community and their sense of place and identity, but they are also accustomed to their poverty being ignored. We welcome the fact that at last it is recognised that the region of Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly is deserving of additional financial aid to bring it into line with the level of gross domestic product enjoyed by the rest of the country and Europe.

I realise that putting together single programming documents is a challenging exercise, and I congratulate the four regions and the Government Departments that have undertaken the gargantuan task of preparing them and getting them off to Europe on schedule. The Minister has acknowledged that the Government inherited a legacy of confusion and complexity: I and other hon. Members want to deal with that issue in the debate. The fault lies partly with European systems, but is also related to the separation of Departments and the failure of a joined-up government approach to this important matter. Putting together the pieces of the objective 1 jigsaw has involved a great deal of work: it is a much less simple task than many other economic development projects have been.

I want the debate to be conducted in a constructive environment. Many hon. Members who represent constituencies in the four regions want to speak on this subject of all-party concern. Properly raising concerns about match funding and its complexities is not scaremongering. Questioning the sources of all available public match funding does not imply that objective 1 will fold: it would be inappropriate to portray that as a doomsday scenario. Equally, however, it would be irresponsible to be complacent. There is some concern that much planning is based more on hope than on certainty.

I have conveyed a message to the Minister so that he is fully aware of questions that I wish to raise in a constructive spirit. I seek clarification of matched funding arrangements, the extent of central and regional co-ordination—in the terminology of joined-up government, the joined-upness of the system—and the extent to which local partners in objective 1 regions may decide their future for themselves, which involves the decision-making procedure.

I have some experience of that process, as I was involved, on behalf of the voluntary sector, in the last objective 5b programme in the south-west, which largely involved Cornwall, but included parts of Devon and Somerset. That experience was pretty unedifying, as the programme started a year late. Total funding for the programme came from Europe, along with all measures, and amounted to £177.6 million. However, the total paid up until the end of 1999 was £71.2 million—a mere 40 per cent. of the EU finance available for that region. We must improve our performance considerably if the objective 1 region of Cornwall is to spend £314 million over a seven-year period and work within the financial programme regulations, which are, appropriately, much stricter.

More money has yet to be claimed, and existing commitments have yet to be fulfilled. However, the prospect for spending the full amount of objective 5b funds is poor. Of most concern is the difficulty of securing public match funding, which partly accounts for the slowness of the programme and the problem of initiating projects. Government bodies and quangos came up with only £15 million, which is 19 per cent. of the match funding, or 10 per cent. of all funding for the 5b process. Most worrying, by far the largest public match-fund contributor was the national lottery—a source that did not exist when the programme was first put together. Lottery sources represent 54 per cent. of total match funding for the Cornwall objective 5b programme.

Of equal concern is the fact that the original intention behind the objective 1 and 5b programmes was strategy-driven. A strategy is devised which those programmes are designed to deliver. My experience was that that turned out to be a six-month bidding round involving spending on a first-come, first-served basis. The Government should increase the extent to which they allow objective 1 regions to take decisions to implement their own strategies, and those decisions should not be overruled. Such regions should have proper support from Government in identifying match funds to develop their strategies.

[Mr. George]

It is impossible for normal well-adjusted humans—of whom there are some outside this place—not to be shocked by the almost unbelievable, impenetrable complexity, red tape and gobbledegook surrounding such schemes. I shall argue that that may choke and suffocate initiatives and deny the very people for whom funds are intended. European funding programmes are probably for those who are pushy, articulate and can afford consultants; such people will find their way through these programmes. However, the socially excluded, who do not have such resources and abilities, will find it difficult to enter the system, let alone get through the application process and bring a worthy initiative to fruition. That is a matter of great concern, and the Government can do a great deal about it.

In my opening remarks, I have concentrated mainly on Cornwall and the Scilly Isles because I know that part of the country best. Other hon. Members will want to speak about areas in their constituencies. However, to secure objective 1 status, Cornwall had to go through an important process of disaggregating itself from the unreal and synthetic objective 5b region to which it was previously attached. Geographically, historically, culturally, constitutionally, communally and economically, Cornwall is an entity in its own right. It does not want to cut itself off from the rest of the world, but rather to include itself in the celebration of the diversity of cultures, peoples and religions throughout the British Isles and Europe.

The key issue is whether what was self-evident to Cornwall and the Scilly Isles is accepted by others, especially given that successive Governments have previously failed to recognise Cornwall's obvious distinctiveness. I congratulate the Government on accepting Cornwall's case to be a European region in its own right, although it is a pity that they did not go further and allow Cornwall to have a regional development agency. However, we shall not go over that argument now.

Once objective 1 is achieved, all the relevant regions will face the challenge of financial and programme discipline—particularly the new challenge of straight-line funding over the seven-year period, which means having to commit an agreed one seventh of the financial year's funds and spend it within two years of making the commitment. Under the objective 5b programme in the past, there was much carry-over of finance from one year to the next. It is helpful to have more discipline, but it brings additional pressure on those who have to deliver the programmes. The Minister recognises that, and I am sure that the partners on the ground are aware of it too.

I have congratulated everyone on the successful campaign for Cornwall's acceptance as a distinct region. There is now the much more challenging job of making the most of the opportunity—collating plans, framing strategies and producing and lodging the single programme document.

Match funding remains a major concern. Having considered all five priorities in the Cornish programme, it is clear that problems remain in drawing on spending under the EAGGF—there are many acronyms and other unique terms relating to European funding. European agricultural guidance and guarantee fund moneys will not be drawn down entirely, as funds available from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and other finances will be required to fulfil the farm diversification and competitiveness strategy.

As to the European social fund, I think that Department for Education and Employment funding and other sources of finance may be sufficient. I am yet to be entirely convinced, but they may be enough to fulfil that part of the programme. Some people are optimistic that there will be enough collective public match funding to support community regeneration and infrastructure measures, largely through the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and from other sources. That seems more a hope than a certainty for the next seven years.

The priority to develop small and medium-sized enterprises is important to an area such as Cornwall, which has almost 20,000 businesses, of which almost 15,000 employ five or fewer people. Those are micro-businesses and they must grow if the economy of Cornwall is to grow. Small businesses will provide the basis for growth, so it is vital to support the enterprise culture—in Cornwall, but doubtless also in west Wales, the valleys and other regions.

We need to ensure that matching MAFF and DTI funding is available. The DTI's enterprise fund would be an important source, but the total amount available next year is £250,000. That sum is available not only to Cornwall, but to the Government's so-called South West regional development agency area. Cornwall represents less than 10 per cent. of the population of that area, so our notional fair share of that money would be a little under £25,000, which would not go very far to kick-start the economy of Cornwall.

Many funds are operated on a regional basis, and the programme operates on the wholly optimistic notion that Cornwall has to secure more than its fair share of national and regional funding. Whatever level of match funding Cornwall achieves under 5b, we must at least double it under objective 1. The communities of south-west England will understandably take the view that Cornwall already has the benefit of objective 1 funds, and will ask why it should have a disproportionate slice of the available regional funding cake. The Minister may wish to offer advice on how to reassure our friends and colleagues in the south-west region that we are not taking more than our fair share to fulfil our objective 1 programme.

Indeed, in a letter to me dated 5 January the Prime Minister wrote:

"The principle of the applicant arranging the funding package is an important element in ensuring local ownership and commitment."

I am sure that that is right. But how does the applicant arrange the funding package when significant portions of the match funding are not in place? It is clear from the Prime Minister's letter that the Government prefer not to agree to a draw-down rate of £1 for £1, but want a lower percentage of UK contribution. Added to that are the complexities of the system that I have already outlined.

Let us assume for a moment that there are sufficient public match funds, although I still have a rather jaundiced view of the system's ability to operate and

deliver the finance to get the projects off the ground. There is not just the European finance—the four funds: the EAGGF, the European regional development fund, the European social fund and the financial instrument for fisheries guidance—but many little pots of funding within each of the four Government Departments, which must all be tapped to make that funding available. Any objective observer of the process would quickly conclude that one needs to be articulate and pushy and have a paid consultant to have any chance of getting through this system, but that is really not the way forward. Frankly, one needs a PhD in gobbledegook to get through the system. Rather than simply sitting back and adding to the complexity by including departmental complexities, the Government should take a handle on the matter and start to see the problems of European funding from an applicant's point of view.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): I applaud the approach that the hon. Gentleman is taking to this issue, which is extremely important to all our four objective 1 areas. I apologise because I must leave to attend a Standing Committee, so I shall not be able to hear his full contribution. Does he agree that the problem of the complexity of the system and the access for local partnerships to central Government sources of match funding requires a cultural change and a change of understanding in Whitehall? The objective 1 programme should be seen not as just another European source of funding for local projects, but as something that will bring economic restructuring to our areas. Whitehall must also see that objective 1 in our four areas can help the pursuit of Government objectives and policies as well as local objectives and policies.

Mr. George: That was a helpful intervention. There is a shared interest in making sure that objective 1 succeeds. The Government have an interest in making sure that the wealth generated in this country is enjoyed by all equally as far as possible, and that the four regions that have been identified as outstandingly poor are given an opportunity to bring themselves up at least to the average enjoyed by the rest of the country. It is in the shared interests of all hon. Members to ensure that that happens. Hon. Members from objective 1 regions know that we share the Government's interest in making the objective 1 programme succeed.

I shall conclude my speech, because it is important that other hon. Members who want to speak have ample time to do so. We must recognise that the point of the exercise is to give an essential lift to the economies of the four poorest regions, not to justify a more complex and impenetrable bureaucracy. We need to overcome the barriers that applicants experience. We need greater certainty about the funds. We need a more applicant and project-centred process. We need a joined-up government approach to the problem. We need greater evidence that the four Departments are coming together strategically. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Swansea, West (Mr. Williams) has proposed in the all-party objective 1 group that a Cabinet Committee should co-ordinate the approach to the issue.

Brittany has a single application form for European funding and regional funding. That makes it considerably easier for applicants for objective 1 status to respond to the complexities of the process. In France, the départements face those complexities and the préfet, with his committee of advisers, decides that if people succeed in one fund, they succeed in the lot. That is how things should happen. Applicants should not have to complete 12, 13, 14 or 15 application forms for different financial years and different criteria.

In the next seven years, there will be a golden opportunity for objective 1 areas. It is vital that we get it right this time, because there will not be a next time. Objective 1 regions deserve the Government's full support. Applicants deserve an applicant-friendly system. I urge the Minister to respond to the genuine fears—we are not scaremongering—that we in the objective 1 regions might fail to make full use of the opportunity provided by objective 1 funds in the next seven years.

10.23 am

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) on securing this important Adjournment debate. It is important because it comes at a critical time when the draft single programming document for objective 1 areas is being considered in Brussels. We have a small amount of invaluable time in which to resolve some of the practical issues that have emerged. They must be resolved if we are to take full advantage of the objective 1 funds for which so many people have worked so hard.

In Merseyside, this issue is especially important because we are coming to the end of the highly successful first objective 1 programme. That programme has successfully safeguarded jobs, secured additional employment and brought new investment to Merseyside. It has introduced innovations to support small businesses—especially the Merseyside special investment fund, which is an innovative fund investing European funds in small businesses—and major projects of cultural and employment significance, such as the conservation centre in Liverpool, which won the award of European museum of the year, the CIMS projects at Liverpool university, which invests in technology transfer, and many local programmes in areas of particular deprivation, such as Dingle, Granby and Vauxhall, which work with local people, support local resources and develop training and employment opportunities.

In considering the practical issues that we face in securing maximum advantage from the second objective 1 round, we in Merseyside want to build on our successes and make maximum use of that funding. What we have already achieved in Merseyside can be replicated in the new objective 1 areas, some of which have similar needs.

One factor is different this time. Significant changes in UK regional policy have taken place, including a much sharper focus on regional economic policy, the creation of regional development agencies with a clear remit and the development of regional economic strategies, which have now been presented for all regions. The regional economic strategy for the north-west covers matters such as the environment, business skills, transportation and general infrastructure, and I suspect that regional economic strategies for the other regions cover similar matters. A change is also taking place in the nature of

[Mrs. Louise Ellman]

the business support offered by the UK Government. Training and enterprise councils and business links are moving to the small firms fund and the skills councils.

Changes in regional policy have taken place. We have regional development agencies and regional economic strategies, and we are sharpening up our means of delivering business support. In addition, Government offices for the regions have a new role, which is still being developed. They should become much more of a voice for the regions than for the Government operating in the regions.

Such factors are extremely important in considering financial and managerial arrangements for the new objective 1 programme. We must ensure that we maximise all available economic development resources in order to bring maximum support to objective 1 areas. To be effective, the use of European objective 1 funds must be aligned as closely as possible with the use of UK funds—whether from the public, the private or the voluntary sector—that are identified for programmes in the regional economic strategies or for local programmes. The two must work together. To make maximum use of those programmes, we need sufficient match funding and co-ordination at all levels.

In Merseyside, the main focus of the new objective 1 single programming document is business support: supporting the creation and survival of SMEs and developing the community's knowledge base and growth points in the economy, such as pharmaceuticals, leisure, work through the docks, which will have major repercussions for the Merseyside economy, new areas such as environmental technologies and spin-offs from our universities and institutions of higher education. We must consider transport, skills and infrastructure as well as investment. In Liverpool, objective 1 funding must be aligned with regeneration, especially through working with Liverpool Vision, the first urban regeneration company to be created following the Rodgers report on the regeneration of urban areas.

Although those are major issues for Merseyside and Liverpool, they also apply to the other objective 1 areas. If we try to keep European objective 1 funds in a separate box, they will not be as effective as they could be. They will be fully effective only if we develop managerial and financial arrangements and structures that will enable objective 1 funds to be used effectively with other funds that are or can be made available.

I shall refer now to specific issues on management and financial arrangements, some of which the hon. Member for St. Ives mentioned. The partners in the Merseyside objective 1 programme have come together to provide finance for a separate officer responsible to the programming committee for not only delivering the programme, but considering how it can be better assessed and made more effective. Will my hon. Friend the Minister explain the Government's views on that issue? I know that discussions have been held at Government level and beyond. It is an important issue because it relates to the establishment of the programme committee—co-ordinated with other funding bodies—as a body in its own right to assess these activities more effectively than before.

It is important to establish effective links, within the programme monitoring committee and elsewhere, between the North West regional development agency, the Government office for the north west—or their equivalents in the other objective 1 areas—and the European Commission. Such links must be developed in an organised way if they are to be effective. Such work is already happening, but I should like an assurance that it will be facilitated at Government level so that the constructive links that are developing within the area are supported nationally. Such co-ordination must be replicated at Government level. It is extremely important that the DFEE, DTI, and DETR—the major Departments involved, although there are others—work together to assist the delivery and co-ordination of the objective 1 programmes. One of the difficulties we encountered in the previous programme was the lack of co-ordination; some of the long delays frequently encountered in putting together and delivering the objective 1 and objective 2 programmes arose because different Departments interpreted Commission guidelines differently, to the detriment of the programme. I ask the Government to address that central issue.

The issue of match funding has been raised. I ask the Minister for an assurance that there will be maximum flexibility in identifying match funding so that we get maximum benefit from the objective 1 programme. Would selective assistance from the DTI, for example, count as match funding? Will there be support for the venture capital funds that some of the regional development agencies are setting up, and which the North West regional development agency is considering, and will they be used to support match funding? Will the Government be as flexible as possible with regard to their programmes and related programmes to enable match funding to be made available, so that we get maximum advantage from objective 1 funds?

Budgets are important. There was a particular problem in the north-west, because the North West regional development agency inherited many of the previous programmes. Because of the limited budget it inherited, most of its funds for 2000–01 and beyond are already committed. Will my hon. Friend assure me that he will reconsider the budgets of the regional development agencies, specifically in relation to objective 1 funding, to ensure flexibility? Will he also assure me that, where necessary, there will be additional funding or additional access to funding, to ensure that objective 1 money is spent as effectively as possible?

The hon. Member for St. Ives referred to a new issue that has emerged with the objective 1 programme—decommitment, to use the jargon. If the allocations for the programme in a given year are not committed by offer letter by the end of the calendar year and have not been spent within two years, the money may automatically be removed from the objective 1 area to which it has been designated.

If that is a firm rule, timing is essential. There were many delays at the beginning of the previous objective 1 programme for Merseyside. First, the Commission did not accept the single programming document put forward by Merseyside, and there were problems with policies and funding. Those difficulties were eventually resolved, the programme is now fully committed and the

funds will be fully spent. However, the new decommitment rule means that if such delays occur again the money will be lost. Our debate is timely because it is important that the problems of match funding, management arrangements and Government co-ordination are resolved now.

My hon. Friend the Minister has a long history of understanding European funding problems. I know that he is deeply committed to regional policy and to European funding for the regions. I ask him to consider sympathetically the points that have been raised in this morning's debate. Their resolution will have maximum impact on the United Kingdom's poorest regions. European funding was hard fought for, particularly by the present Government. By resolving these issues, he will bring maximum value to the regions and make the Government's regional policies fully effective.

10.36 am

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) on securing this timely debate. It is important that those of us who represent the four regions that have secured objective 1 funding should have common cause. The details may be different from one area to another, but the principles that we are debating today—what we want to secure for our areas—are identical. It is right and proper that we should all pull in the same direction; that will ensure that the programmes are delivered in such a way as to achieve maximum benefit.

Large parts of Wales are designated as objective 1 areas. That is a reflection of our failure over the years to attain economic regeneration. The extent of the problem is shown by the fact that, out of a total population of 2.9 million, 1.9 million people in Wales get less than 75 per cent. of the average per capita income of the European Union. The problem affects not only the old coalfield areas—one can well understand that the running down of the coal industry has caused income per head to fall here—but the rural west and north-west, and a large part of north Wales, which has suffered rural deprivation and the running down of some of the historic centres on the coast that used to generate economic wealth.

Taking all that together, the immense challenge is to get the gross domestic product per head up to something approaching the European or UK average. The objective 1 programme gives us a God-sent opportunity, but it is available only between now and 2006, perhaps with an overspill for a year or two more as the programme runs down. We shall not have this opportunity again, because countries from eastern Europe will have joined the European Union and will start making demands on its regional resources. We must make the most of this opportunity.

I pay tribute to the work undertaken by former Ministers in the Welsh Office in securing the programme for Wales. For many years, people campaigned to get the nomenclature of units of territorial statistics II—NUTS—map changed to reflect the reality of the country's social deprivation. In their time at the Welsh Office, the right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies), as Secretary of State for Wales, and the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), as his deputy, faced a tremendous battle to secure that funding: that it has been done is great. The objective in winning the battle is to make the programme work, and we face several problems in Wales. Questions about structures for managing the programmes and the generation of interest in new projects, which is vital, are largely matters for the National Assembly for Wales, and I must pursue them with my other hat on.

The fundamental question that faces the National Assembly and those involved in the project is about funding, as has been mentioned by the hon. Members for St. Ives and for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman). We in north Wales have watched with great interest Liverpool's progress and the benefits that it has secured from the programme, and we wish Merseyside well with the next part of the project. Both those hon. Members referred to funding, matched funding and the availability of finance. The situation is slightly different in Wales, because the Barnett formula defines our available funding. A rolling programme agreed by the Welsh Office and the Treasury is updated from year to year.

The expenditure available to us was defined in the Welsh Office spending programme more than a year ago, before Wales was accorded objective 1 status. In that rolling programme, the total managed expenditure for Wales in 2000–01 was £7,908 million. No provision in that figure was made for objective 1, as it was some months before that had been cleared by the European Union. Under the National Assembly and the office of the Secretary of State, who remains in Westminster, the budget for next year will be £7,909 million, which is within £1 million of the original budget. There is no additional money whatever in the budget for Wales for 2000–01 to reflect the additional expenditure necessary with regard to objective 1.

The figures are similar under the current expenditure plans for 2001–02. The original budget for Wales published more than a year ago was £8,334 million for that year, and the updated figure published a few weeks ago by Edwina Hart, the Assembly's Finance Secretary, was £8,335 million. Again, that is within £1 million. For the year after next, no additional money has been included in the budget for Wales to take account of objective 1.

Hon. Members have touched on additionality—the projects to be provided by objective 1 money will be additional to what would have otherwise taken place. That argument is not new. It was used by members of the Labour party involved in the fight in the early '90s when Bruce Millan was a Commissioner in Brussels and the focus was on the RECHAR programme. A famous victory was secured then.

A document provided by the Coalfield Communities Campaign, which has been heavily involved in areas of England and Wales, states:

> "In an agreement signed in 1992, the government agreed to introduce procedures that would ensure that EU grants led to extra spending in the places they were intended to assist."

That is what we expect. In Cornwall, Merseyside, South Yorkshire—I noted with interest the positive comments made by the hon. Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey)—and Wales, we expect additional expenditure, but our budgets do not have the facility for that. If we have to divert money from programmes already published as part of our budget for Wales so

[Mr. Dafydd Wigley]

as to provide matched funding for European expenditure, less money will be available for the programmes than was originally foreseen.

We are not talking about small amounts of money. In Wales, we are talking about match funding of about £170 million to £180 million a year. Graham Meadows, a senior officer in charge of such programmes in the European Union, told us that that match funding must come from the public sector. That was confirmed in a regional meeting of the National Assembly in Rhyl in September—I see that the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) is present. Civil servants from the Welsh Office confirmed that the information they had been given by Brussels was that the match funding for the new programme had to come from the public sector, not the private sector. That is on record, having been stated in Brussels by Graham Meadows to MEPs, and by civil servants in meetings in Wales.

If the match funding has to be found from the public sector and there is no additional provision whatever in our budget in Wales, where will the money come from? Something must be done to find it. It is not simply a problem for 2000–01. I accept that there will be a delay in expenditure, and that projects started in that year may not fully need their cash flow expenditure until the following year. Therefore, the figure needed in 2000–01 may be below £170 million, but we need additional money.

On 23 November, I received a parliamentary answer from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, which stated:

"The responsibility for identifying match funding from the many sources available in the public and private sectors is a matter for project applicants in these areas."—[*Official Report*, 26 November 1999; Vol. 339, c. 211W.]

Central Government are washing their hands of the need to provide match funding, and are labouring under the misapprehension that private sector money can provide it. That is not the message that we have had, clearly and categorically, from Brussels and from civil servants in the National Assembly.

As we work within a global figure defined by the Barnett formula in Wales, we must be assured that a mechanism has been authorised for public expenditure survey cover for the additional money from the European Union for objective 1 purposes. We need additional match funding to ensure that genuinely additional projects will be pursued in Wales, and we need additional PES cover for the half the money for those projects that comes from Brussels.

So far, we have been told that the Government will not let Wales down, and I hope that we can bank on that commitment. I am glad to hear hon. Members, especially those on the Government Benches, reinforcing that hope. If we can trust that commitment, we shall be very happy indeed, but we want to know how it will met.

My local authority has passed me a copy of a letter that the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), who is in the Chamber, received from the Prime Minister. In the context of objective 1 spending in relation to Cornwall—I guess that his comments are equally applicable to other areas—the Prime Minister said:

"There has been considerable speculation that the UK Government will make additional public resources available to these areas in order to provide a further source of match funding for projects under the programme. However, such match funding will continue to be the responsibility of the grant applicant and will be largely derived from the existing domestic programmes available to the area . . . I cannot guarantee that more public funding will be available".

If more public funding is not available, there will be cuts in expenditure in Wales on health and education to provide the money necessary for match funding for the European programme. Frankly, that is not acceptable. The areas in Wales that are entitled to the money are areas of social deprivation. The objective of the programme is to overcome that deprivation with self-regenerative economic growth. It is unacceptable that social programmes should have to be cut to maximise the benefit that we receive from the European Union.

When the Minister winds up the debate, I hope that he will give a categorical assurance—not simply for Wales but for Merseyside, South Yorkshire and Cornwall as well—that there will be additional match funding so that projects can be genuinely additional. There must also be PES cover, so that the funds from Brussels will be over and above the expenditure programme that has been approved so far.

10.49 am

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) on securing the debate. I am glad that he has not followed the doomsday scenario adopted by some of his hon. Friends, who seem more interested in cheap headlines today than in Cornwall's prosperity tomorrow.

Mr. Duncan: Oh, that is a good line.

Ms Atherton: It is a true line.

The people of Cornwall and those of other objective 1 regions have been given a vital opportunity, and everyone must do whatever they can to maximise the benefits. I am confident that those who have worked so hard to win this opportunity will ensure that that happens. The Labour Government who won the additional funding will ensure that the poorest regions benefit most. That is why I welcome the opportunity of suggesting how that can be done.

A little history is required because some hon. Members do not remember how Cornwall won objective 1 status in the first place. Two years ago, the county had as much chance of winning objective 1 status as Manchester United has of winning the world FIFA cup—it was not even in the sphere of possibility. Several events assisted our campaign, notably the sad end of tin mining in Cornwall, which highlighted all too dramatically the plight that the region faced.

My hon. Friend the Minister assisted in what became a long campaign within Government to point out the needs of the county. Even colleagues from the north of England failed to understand the endemic nature of Cornwall's poverty. I am pleased to say, however, that many Ministers listened, and when the Prime Minister met me and my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devenport (Mr. Jamieson), Cornwall suddenly became a runner. The Prime Minister instructed civil servants to

make the case for Cornwall to be separated from Devon for statistical purposes. To my intense joy, within a few weeks the case was won in Europe. The poorest region in the UK now stood at the front of the list of achieving objective 1.

Mr. Duncan: Will the hon. Lady confirm that the bid on behalf of Cornwall had been set in motion by the Conservative Government before the general election?

Ms Atherton: I am astonished: all of us knew at that time that Cornwall was not even in the running. However, I am delighted to hear that we have the support of the Conservatives, and I can confirm that the key statistical separation from Devon was achieved not by the previous Conservative Government, but by the present Labour Government.

When I heard the news about the statistical separation, I danced around my living room for ages while an electrician looked on aghast as I celebrated what I immediately recognised as a great opportunity. That night the gloom merchants were out: they said that Cornwall would be left out; that the Labour Government would not confer assisted area status; and that, at the final hour, Cornwall would be denied funding. But, hey presto, we did it. We now hear the same soothsayers predicting that the Government will not match fund objective 1. Balderdash! Much work remains to be done on many fronts—in central and local government—and we now have an opportunity to discuss it. It is important for the Government to establish mechanisms to maximise the benefits of the objective 1 programme. The form that such mechanisms should take should be considered urgently in the weeks ahead.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade for a letter sent to me last night, which outlines ways in which partnerships can access match funding. I am also pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions has agreed to meet the all-party objective 1 group. The Minister for Trade may also agree to participate to help to achieve joined-up government. We will be able to discuss funding mechanisms and establish the best way forward. As others have argued, there is an excellent case for joined-up government in the administration of the objective 1 programme. That is vital. Departments must work together to establish the compatibility of various sources of funding and to ensure that the programme is administered effectively. Those Departments must work with Government offices for the regions and the RDAs. "Joined-up" must refer to the regions as well as to the centre.

On the specific question of match funding, regional partnerships must identify and access sources of funding; there are, rightly, no blank cheques. We should examine ways of accessing these sources effectively. Equally, we should decide which funding sources are compatible with European guidance—we need assistance to ensure flexibility from Departments. We must not allow projects to be frustrated by bureaucratic barriers or regulations, or become bogged down waiting for decisions.

Only last week, a local businessman asked me for advice about whether retrospective funding was available for an exciting project that his company was developing. I want clear guidelines from the Government on how such information will be given and when. I and other members of the all-party objective 1 group have put these points to Ministers in the past few weeks. We are now waiting for answers. We need to hit the ground running and to ensure that arrangements are established as soon as possible. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister shares my sentiments.

I am pleased to say that I know of several exciting and innovative projects being developed in Cornwall that will make a genuine difference to people's lives. Despite all that I have said, there is an exciting feeling that objective 1 can work for the county and do what it was designed to do—make a real difference to one of the hardest-hit areas of the country. We can make Cornwall a can-do rather than a can't-do county.

Unfortunately, I occasionally have to respond to ill-conceived stories that objective 1 is under threat and that this will be a wasted opportunity. Before Christmas, a story was sent by certain Conservative Members to local papers claiming that the Government refused to match-fund this programme. I am at a loss to understand what they were talking about. Opposition Members had taken a letter from the Prime Minister, which was referred to a little while ago, and spun their own somewhat eccentric interpretation. They decided that the Prime Minister has said that there would be no objective 1 funding for Cornwall, and they hit the "Six O'clock News" saying as much. The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor), whom I am delighted to see here, appeared prominently in those television programmes. However, so great was his concern that he failed to mention the letter and his anxieties in the two hours that he spent with me in the run-up to the programmes. He then hit the television stations when it was impossible to check the veracity of the story. Not content with talking down the eclipse, on objective 1 the hon. Gentleman seems to want to be known as the Member of Parliament for Truro, St. Austell and Doom. Jeremiah mark 2!

What was the hon. Gentleman thinking of when he stated that people in Government Departments would be instructed to put down the telephone on anyone who spoke with a Cornish accent, and that the funding of local councils would be withdrawn? In truth, he and other hon. Members had decided to misinterpret a statement from the Prime Minister that said nothing new.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Atherton: No. I am making a specific point about Cornwall, and I wish to keep to it.

Mr. George: Will the hon. Lady give way to one of her local Members?

Ms Atherton: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman if he insists.

Mr. George: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. History is being rewritten during the valuable minutes in which we should be pressing the Minister about where match funding should be identified. Instead, we are getting into

[Mr. George]

a ridiculous spat over an extreme, untrue story. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should be urging the Minister to identify ways in which the programme could move forward?

Ms Atherton: We have spent much of the past hour raising those issues. Just before Christmas, there was some rewriting of history, which should be put on record because many people in Cornwall were greatly disturbed by what was said. The hon. Gentleman knows that much confidence was lost, and many people working on good projects became disheartened. Those people came to us as their Members of Parliament to ask what was happening.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Does the hon. Lady believe, as her statements at the time suggested, that the Government should be trusted to deliver the match funding required, given the Prime Minister's statement that he will not guarantee that funding? That is what the letter said, but the hon. Lady asks us to take it on trust that the funding will be provided. However, our debate suggests that hon. Members do not believe that to be the case. We want to win guarantees from the Minister that the Prime Minister would not give.

Ms Atherton: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. We do not take the matter on trust. However, many of the Labour Government's initiatives—such as health action zones, education action zones, and an imminent development of which the hon. Gentleman is aware—reveal a track record of commitment to Cornwall. The hon. Gentleman and others were not 100 per cent. convinced that the Government would come up with the objective 1 programme and fight their case at the Berlin summit. However, the Government did exactly that. People should consider how Ministers have operated and worked for Cornwall, and give praise where it is due.

That does not mean that I do not want answers from Ministers. I have met Ministers and shall continue to work and fight with them in order to make the case for the county of Cornwall. I repeat: a Labour Government fought for Cornwall to get objective 1 status, and a Labour Government will give a commitment to making match funding work.

11.1 am

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) on securing this debate on objective 1 funding. I should like to stress the importance of such funding to the area that I represent, and to discuss match funding.

The exact opposite of the problem mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) confronted my county when it tried to be included in the bid from west Wales and the valleys. We had to attach ourselves to that bid, whereas my hon. Friend had to divest herself of the burdensome Devonshire aspect.

I should like to mention the main players who secured the inclusion of my constituency and county in the west Wales and valleys bid. I pay tribute to the Cardiff Business School for providing the up-to-date statistics that set the ball rolling. Old statistics based on the eight counties in Wales did not allow Denbighshire and Conwy to participate in the bid. However, new statistics supplied by the Cardiff business school on a 22-county basis gave a true reflection of poverty across Wales.

I also pay tribute to Huw Vaughan Thomas, chief executive of Denbighshire county council, who supplied local Members of Parliament with those statistics, which were used by the then Minister at the Welsh Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), to assess the position. Throughout Wales people were saying, "Do not change the map at the eleventh hour. Do not jeopardise things for Wales." However, the Minister took into account arguments for and against our inclusion, and used his decision-making power to ensure that Denbighshire and Conwy were allowed to be part of the bid.

I am grateful to the House of Commons Library for providing the additional information that I believe swung the Minister into making the correct decision to include Denbighshire and Conwy's population of 250,000 in the bid.

Opposition parties have not given sufficient credit to the Prime Minister for the role he played in Berlin in securing objective 1 funding for four UK regions. He flew to Hawarden in north Wales and announced the news at the Labour party conference in Llandudno. Insufficient tribute has been paid to the Prime Minister for that: he would not fly to Berlin and secure funding for the UK, only to scupper that funding on his return, as Opposition Members are suggesting.

It is right for hon. Members to raise the important issue of match funding, which, however, must be kept in perspective. A fine balance is required for match funding and creating the energy and enthusiasm that is necessary to make a success of objective 1. There is a danger of talking down Wales, turning off the business community and stifling the energy and enthusiasm that are the necessary catalysts for successful objective 1 projects in Wales and, indeed, in the rest of the United Kingdom. We should encourage our local business people, as well as United Kingdom and international investors, to invest in Wales.

The case for match funding can be made and it is right that it should be discussed openly in Parliament, but it should be kept in perspective. I am making representations. In the past six months, I have met the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister for the Cabinet Office face to face to put the case for Wales and the United Kingdom to get proper match funding. That is how things should be done. We must go forward united. I know that there are many opportunities for Opposition parties to make cheap political points. You are in a privileged position, but I ask you to consider that privilege carefully.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. The hon. Gentleman must remember the conventions of the House. The Chair does not have to consider anything other than whether protocol and the Standing Orders are observed.

Mr. Ruane: I accept that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) referred to the need to match national strategy with the local strategies that have been developed in the single

programming documents. I concur with that. The Government's main aim is to combat social exclusion and eradicate the poverty that occurred in the 66 constituencies in the objective 1 regions of the United Kingdom during 18 years of Tory rule. We are developing national strategies on social exclusion, education, the economy and the environment. They should be seamless and fit in with the local strategies that have been developed. We must work together without scoring party political points, and present a united front to Ministers during the critical spending review. If we present our case cogently with facts, figures and passion, we shall be successful in achieving match funding.

11.7 am

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): I hope that hon. Members will forgive me for speaking through a slight veil of snuffles today, but in the circumstances I think that I have been let off lightly. May I take this opportunity to welcome the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley)? All hon. Members will be pleased to see him on his feet, fighting fit.

This is the first occasion on which I have spoken in this Room, and I shall endeavour to adhere to the forms of the House in what I think is a failing experiment of an experimental Chamber. None the less, the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) has raised an important issue, but it is proving its importance only inasmuch as he has shown, as have all those who have contributed to the debate, how unsatisfactory is the state of affairs. We are examining a shambolic system. It is a bureaucratic nightmare, and it is not working. The hon. Member for St. Ives showed that very well; his main thesis was that people must be articulate, pushy and be able to afford a consultant just to reach first base—I might put in a bid. The system is surrounded by bureaucratic muddle. A D.Phil in gobbledegook is needed just to submit an application. That is not how such a system should work. The Minister will have to explain in detail how he will unravel the mess and introduce coherence and cogency to a process for which we in the House should have to answer.

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): As usual.

Mr. Duncan: We await the Minister's clarification with some trepidation.

We have the absurdity of the hon. Member for St. Ives saying that Cornwall is struggling to spend £314 million. We also have the nonsensical lack of clarity on match funding. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) has made a plea for what she calls flexibility in match funding, which looks like a plea to get the maximum out of Europe with the minimum out of her Government. That is what her definition of flexbility seems to be.

We have witnessed the spat between the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) and Liberal Democrat Members about whether she bragged that her Government would provide match funding. The basis on which the money is spent seems to be in a complete mess. We believe that the system is utterly flawed, but I do not blame anyone for taking the money if it is available. If there is a pot of gold waiting to be used, anyone representing the interests of their constituents will try to find a way of diverting it their way. It is a bit like Dudley Moore at the end of the film "Arthur" saying, "I'm not stupid. I took the money." If the system is offering funds, any responsible Member of Parliament will try to obtain them.

If we step back from the system and look at what is happening, we can see how it is taking on an absurd identity. We are in the realms of the absurd. We are net contributors to the European Union. We pay billions into the EU. It gives money back and claims the credit and then, having returned to us money that was ours in the first place, demands that the Government put in more money. We have this extraordinary merry-go-round of taxpayers' money going into contributions, coming back to us and then being spent only partly by us. It is mostly spent by the EU in a way that we cannot properly decipher and for which the House no longer appears able to be properly responsible.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): I am confused by what the hon. Member is saying and would be grateful for some clarification. A moment ago he was trying to lay claim to having put in the original bid under the previous Government. Now he appears to be saying that it is so much of a shambles that it should never have happened in the beginning. Would he have fought as hard as the present Government have fought to get objective 1 status, particularly for Cornwall?

Mr. Duncan: We made the bid because the system was there. If the system is there, one uses it to get the best one can for Britain. The whole system now deserves better examination. Labour has had 18 years to think about it, but it does not appear to have thought about it at all. The merry-go-round of money going from us to the EU and back again is looking increasingly absurd. The right hon. Member for Caernarfon, with his £170 million match funding in Wales, now says that he wants more public spending. In addition to the money being taxed and going there and coming back, we have further pressure to compound the burden on the taxpayer in order to double the money, or at least significantly add to it, and to spend it in these areas.

My point is simply that we are elected to the House of Commons to look after the interests of Britain. If it were genuinely additional money I could see the point, but given that it is ours in the first place, the House of Commons should decide within the boundaries of the United Kingdom how its money, raised from its taxpayers, is spent on its citizens.

Mr. Ruane: Can the hon. Gentleman tell me whether that was the system under the previous Government?

Mr. Duncan: Well, that was the benefit of my original thought. We should not just accept the status quo. We should consider whether the system is working, and the debate has proved today is that it is not working. We should decide whether this merry-go-round system makes sense any more, and I seriously question whether it does.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Duncan: No. I want to conclude as I want to leave the Minister some time and I am eating into it already.

[Mr. Duncan]

He is going to need it. I shall ask him some specific questions. What criteria were used to draw up the map? What were the political criteria? What criteria will be used in deciding how to spend the money? What will be the role of the RDAs, in their interaction with business and the regional offices of the DTI, in deciding and administering that expenditure? Perhaps the Minister can give us a detailed explanation of how the match funding system will work.

11.15 am

The Minister for Trade (Mr. Richard Caborn): I apologise for my late arrival—I arrived as Big Ben was striking the 10th note of 10 o'clock. I walked from the Ministry—we do not use the transport provided any more—but there were many visitors in London this morning and the traffic lights were against me. I am also suffering from the cold that is doing the rounds.

The contribution of the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) was unfortunate and showed how far the Opposition are from public opinion. The House makes those decisions. The hon. Gentleman ought to reflect seriously on what the British public said in May 1997 in response to such extremism, because the Tory party is becoming even more extreme. The hon. Gentleman demonstrated a marked ignorance on the subject under consideration—which explains his comments about the sitting. Hon. Members present have an in-depth knowledge of the subject—which, judging from the hon. Gentleman's contribution, the Opposition clearly do not.

I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) on his choice of subject and on the interest that he has taken in European structural funds. He said that he was an expert on the matter before entering the House. European structural funds are a real and tangible benefit of our membership of the European Union. Indeed, for many people they are the most tangible benefit, contributing to a better environment, more jobs and better training. I am therefore delighted that the hon. Gentleman has given us the opportunity to debate aspects of their impact on the UK.

The hon. Member for St. Ives made several points specific to Cornwall and its objective 1 programme. Before addressing them, I remind hon Members of some of the essential features of European structural funds as they affect the UK. There are four such funds, the first of which is the European regional development fund, which reduces the gap between the levels of development and living standards of the various regions and the extent to which the least-favoured regions lag behind. The second is the European social fund, which helps to develop employment by promoting employability, the business spirit and equal opportunities and by investing in human resources. The third is the European guidance and guarantee section of the agricultural fund, which helps to preserve the link between agriculture and land, improving and supporting the competitiveness of agriculture, retaining population in the countryside and preserving and maintaining the environment. We believe that that is vital, especially in the context of the debate about the urban renaissance and encroachment on greenbelt and greenfield sites. The fourth is the financial instrument for fisheries guidance, which helps to achieve a sustainable balance between fisheries resources and their exploitation, to modernise the fishing industry and to revitalise areas dependent on fishing.

A separate cohesion fund exists to help the four member states—Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain—whose per capita GNP is below 90 per cent. of the European average. The operation of structural funds has been somewhat complex—as has been demonstrated this morning. I am glad to say that in the last renegotiation the Government achieved some simplification, although complexities remain. The number of objectives has been reduced in practice from seven to three. On UK allocations for the funds, which will be in place for the next seven years, we can expect to receive about £11 billion, which is, as I said earlier, a tangible benefit of EU membership.

As has already been mentioned, the fact that my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer secured such a good deal for the UK at the negotiation of the new round of structural funds at the European Council in Berlin in March 1999 shows the success of the Government's policy. It presents a marked contrast with what the official Opposition have said this morning, and shows that constructive engagement works in dealing with the EU. The result was a package that is affordable and fair to the UK as a whole and to all the regions. Despite the reduction of population coverage by one third for objective 2 areas, the overall package produced an increase in the total population covered by geographical objectives from 24 million to 26.8 million. The UK's total allocation in euros has increased by 18 per cent.

The regional programmes are developed and managed primarily by the regions themselves. To respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), I hope that the structures that are put in place will be flexible enough to deliver what people want in the regions. Successive revisions of structural funds have increased the role of local partnerships in designing and implementing programmes. Everyone—with the possible exception of the official Opposition—with a serious interest in European structural funds welcomes that development. It is the partnerships that know their regions best. They are committed to them and are best placed to identify projects that will make a genuine impact in their regions. The local partnership typically comprises representation from local authorities, local and regional development bodies, education bodies, chambers of commerce, voluntary organisations and others. In England, regional Government offices have a vital role to play in the management of programmes.

RDAs have already been mentioned. I emphasise the importance of devolution and the introduction of RDAs in England. Devolved Administrations are responsible for programmes in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is the lead Department for objective 1 and 2 programmes, while the Department of Trade and Industry has an overall co-ordinating role and represents the entire UK in negotiations with the European Commission on structural funds in general.

In England, RDAs have been closely involved in designing the new objective 1 programmes and in ensuring that programmes are consistent with their regional economic strategies. RDAs in the south-west contributed substantially to the objective 1 plan for Cornwall, and I hope that such informed development can continue, not only in Cornwall but in other areas.

The Government's role during the programming period is, nationally, to monitor programmes, their expenditure and the effect of exchange rate movements—the Commission makes all commitments in euros—to provide advice and guidance to regional partners on technical matters, to help to resolve problems between Departments and the Commission, to act as the channel through which payments from Brussels are made and to verify that money is spent properly, in accordance with fund rules.

The Commission's proposals for improved and more transparent financial control management in structural funds are extremely welcome. The UK has consistently and rigorously pursued better financial management and accountability of all European expenditure: we are all European taxpayers, and it is vital that our taxes are well spent and properly accounted for and that genuine value for money is achieved.

I turn now to the funding of programmes, the matter in which hon. Members have most interest. As has already been mentioned, several hon. Members have asked about match funding in the debate and in correspondence with the Government on the matter from the Prime Minister down. I am pleased to have the opportunity to try to explain as clearly as possible how the system of match funding will work, because some misunderstanding has arisen.

Structural funds account for only a proportion of the cost of a project. The remainder must be found from national sources. Match funding may be obtained from central Government or local government, from other organisations such as development bodies, or from the voluntary sector, and may include a variable element from the private sector. [*Interruption.*] I am glad that it was your pager that sounded, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and not anyone else's.

It is important to note that regulations allow grants of up to 75 per cent. for objective 1 areas. However, the English objective 1 programmes have chosen to apply for support from the funds equivalent only to match funding from the public sector. The addition of private sector match funding has resulted in average grant rates of below 50 per cent. That increases the overall size of programmes, because, although the overall allocation from the funds is fixed, the programmes have to find proportionally more match funding. I stress that that was the decision of the regional partnerships.

Mr. Andrew George *rose—*

Mr. Caborn: I shall give way in a moment.

I am saying not that 75 per cent. would have been achieved, but that regulations allow for more than 50 per cent. The objective 1 areas decided to go for 50:50 on match funding. We should consider what would happen to the rest of the people in the region if the 50 per cent. that is public money were taken out of the match funding. Of £100 expenditure, £45 comes from the EU, £45 is match funding and £10 is from the private sector. If the private sector wants to provide £15, should one reduce the £45 of match funding from the public sector to £40, liberating that £5 to be spent somewhere else in the region, or should it be additional to that funding, which would allow us to continue to expand the programme in that objective 1 area?

When setting up the regional development agencies on behalf of the Government, I tried to get the RDAs to look holistically at their regions, and to consider using finance, wherever it came from, to deliver a strategy. I believe that the way in which match funding is being developed militates against that.

Mr. George: I am somewhat at a loss, not knowing whether the Minister is atempting to shift the responsibility for that decision on to the partnerships in each of the four regions. The Government signed off those programmes when they went to the Commission in November. I presume that the Treasury and Government Departments agreed to the funding profiles within those programmes.

Mr. Caborn: That is absolutely true, but I and my colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, drew it to the attention of those who were making applications that there could be problems with match funding. However, because it was a regional decision, we said that we would live with it. It must be accepted that the programme, which accounts for about 10 per cent. of what it spent, is additional to what has already been put in to those regions.

I appreciate the problems, but the money is additional to the programmes now going on. In terms of match funding, it will therefore be easy. Block grants cannot be made, because they would not follow the particular schemes for which match funding was required and which would be additional to that spending. However, I and my colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and in the Treasury are prepared to consider whether to produce a new list. It is in our interests to ensure match funding to achieve a bigger take, but the decision is taken by the regions. That is what devolution of power is about. Regional decisions are now determining the level of match funding that will have to be raised. We believe that the money is there. We are prepared to reconsider regional selective assistance, which we were asked to do, and other assistance, and come back to the hon. Gentleman.

Unfortunately, time has caught up with us. There is much more to put on the record, but there has been a bit of in-fighting among hon. Members so I have been unable to give a full explanation. If hon. Members write to me, I shall respond to them. If they wish to promote another debate, I shall be more than willing to come to this Dispatch Box or the other at any time and debate the subject with the official Opposition.

Poverty (London)

11.30 am

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I welcome this opportunity to draw attention to the level and extent of poverty in London and to ways of combating it.

London is the largest city in western Europe. It is a major international centre of finance and communications and our capital city—a city of immense dynamism and prosperity. For that reason, it has for too long been easy for people to ignore the extent and depth of poverty here. The largest concentrations of poverty and deprivation in Britain are here in the capital city. We have deprived neighbourhoods cheek by jowl with some of the richest neighbourhoods in the world. The City of London is probably the most prosperous square mile in the world, and is next to Hackney and Tower Hamlets, not far from Newham, and across the river from Southwark, where many people live in abject poverty.

The comparisons and contrasts to be found in the capital city read like comparisons between the first world and the third world. Infant mortality in Hackney is 10 times as high as in the London borough of Kingston. Someone living in Newham is twice as likely to die before age 75 as someone living in the London borough of Bromley, about 10 miles away. One quarter of all the families in Tower Hamlets live in overcrowded conditions. Half the children in inner London are entitled to free school meals: all this in the capital city of one of the world's leading economies.

The Government, I am glad to say, have an anti-poverty strategy. We need to ensure that the resources devoted to combating poverty are made appropriately available in London. In London we have the machinery and the commitment to pursue that strategy and make it work. That is a job for the new mayor and assembly. It will be necessary to draw up a strategy to tackle poverty, but that alone is not good enough; we must ensure that the strategy is carried out, so that while everyone in London works to make our city a cleaner, healthier, safer and more prosperous place, we must also give top priority to helping the worst-off families and worst-off areas.

Some London neighbourhoods have an unholy combination of high unemployment and low wages and poor working conditions for the people who have a job, high homelessness or, where there is a home, poor housing, high crime and disorder, and high environmental pollution. A few neighbourhoods have the whole rotten lot of those characteristics. Hamlet says:

> "When sorrows come, they come not in single spies
> But in battalions."

The battalions are raging through quite a few neighbourhoods in this city.

That unholy mixture gives rise to deprivation, despair and debt. It is estimated that about 300,000 Londoners turn to legal moneylenders, but many more turn to loan sharks. These are the lowest of the low because they victimise people who are already victims. They put poor families in double and treble jeopardy. The legal moneylenders are no better financially because some of them charge real interest rates of 200 to 900 per cent.

We must save people from accruing such levels of debt. One way of doing so is to promote credit unions, which have a vital role—and could have a bigger role—in helping families. That amounts to a good old traditional socialist way for people to club together to help one another, paying in when they can afford it so that people can borrow when they need it. I am usually in favour of creating employment, but if that would help to put loan sharks out of business, I would be happy to dance on their graves.

We need a combined effort, with credit unions offering alternatives and the police and council trading standards working together to help to save people from the loan sharks. When it comes to legal moneylenders, the Office of Fair Trading should look again at the case for maximum interest rates. I do not wish to appear too much like a class warrior, but it remains the case that the poorer people are, the higher interest rates they have to pay. If people working at the Office of Fair Trading were themselves faced with 200 to 900 per cent. interest rates, they might see more merit in setting a statutory boundary to their proposals.

Most people, unless they are very well off, need to borrow at certain times. Poor people are often so desperate that they have to borrow small sums. A poor family might need to borrow in order to buy clothes for the children at the start of a school term or school year, or kit them out for football or swimming, or even to buy a new pair of shoes. Holidays and home improvements are other examples which credit unions can help with. However, the best way of getting people in deprived areas out of the circle of debt and despair is to get them a job. I have always believed that those who want a job should be able to gain one and that, if they are working for a living, they should be paid a living wage. People should be able to work their way out of poverty. It is not true of everyone, I know, but most people who could do a job would like to have one: they would rather receive money through wages than through benefits. I want a London at work, not a London on benefits.

All over the city as I speak, business people, the Confederation of British Industry, the chambers of commerce, trade unions, the London First organisation, Labour councils and voluntary organisations are all working to make London a more attractive place in which to invest. We need new investors in jobs here. We also need to ensure that when existing firms opt for major investment in new equipment, they do so here rather than going to a green-field site somewhere outside this great city. Such firms want more skilled staff, fewer transport delays and less crime. They want their staff to have better access to decent housing and education. They are unlikely to be attracted by the proposals of one of my rivals for the Labour nomination for mayor who advocates a special London corporation tax. Imposing additional costs on London businesses is the last way to encourage people to invest for the first time or to reinvest in this area.

The mayor and the authority have a massive contribution to make to tackling poverty. As I explained, that will include reducing crime and disorder, improving the transport system and better targeting public funding for regeneration. Our promise to establish a Metropolitan police authority should improve the effectiveness of the Metropolitan police in tackling crime and disorder. Our transport proposals

for London should bring about improvements and our proposals to establish a London development agency should mean that priorities for regeneration better reflect Londoners' needs.

All our proposals can help London to retain existing jobs and create new ones. We must use London's strengths to tackle its weaknesses. London has huge advantages—that cannot be denied. It is a major centre of communications at a time when our language dominates world communications. London is a major centre for creative industries. Its universities, colleges, research centres and medical schools are coming up with new ideas and initiatives which, if we could lock on to them, could create new jobs with a future in this city. We must do that: we must get jobs and businesses and offer better training.

London is a largely prosperous city in which, officially, about 250,000 people are out of work. They are mainly men and many are young. A hugely disproportionate number of those who are out of work are black and Asian young people. Black people and Asians are twice as likely to be unemployed as other Londoners. That is wrong. Unemployment is not evenly spread: in some London constituencies, 20 per cent. of the male population are out of work; in some wards, it is 40 per cent. In other constituencies, however, unemployment is less than 2 per cent.

Everyone wants London to be cleaner, safer, healthier and more prosperous. Anyone interested in representing London or being the mayor of London—even Lord Archer before his untimely demise—would subscribe to that idea. However, there is a further aspect if one is a socialist and a member of the Labour party: London must be a fairer place. It will be fairer, with prosperity shared properly, only if we recognise the need for that and introduce positive policies to bring it into being.

That is why I propose to establish a medical officer of health for London, who is nothing to do with the national health service and reports to the mayor and the assembly. Health is important in itself, but it is also a major indicator of poverty: ill health is a product of poverty. I want a medical officer of health for London, to monitor the capital's health, identifying in particular those areas in which people are least healthy, which are the places in which people are least wealthy.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): My right hon. Friend mentioned inner London's problems. May I—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. This is a 30-minute debate. Without arrangements with the Chairman, interventions are against the rules. There has been no indication that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) is willing to give way.

Mr. Dobson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall certainly attempt to deal with the matter that my hon. Friend may have wished to raise. Poverty-stricken neighbourhoods are not confined to inner London. Boroughs such as Newham or Brent—which few are aware are in outer London—are, as a whole, deprived. There are also pockets of poverty throughout the capital, which we must tackle, wherever they are.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Had I known that that was predetermined, I might have been prepared for the event.

Mr. Dobson: It was not predetermined. However, I was aware of the matter that my hon. Friend was likely to raise, which was a logical step from what I was already saying.

The medical officer of health would tackle those things that are systematically making people ill, which include not having a job, being on low wages, having poor working conditions, having nowhere to live or nowhere decent to live and suffering from high levels of crime, disorder and environmental pollution. We must tackle all those issues. That is not a function of the national health service, except as almost a sideline; it is a function of many other organisations in this city. We must bring them together to ensure that we reduce poverty and its evil impact on people's hopes, prospects and health.

Poverty in this city has grown; the inequalities of wealth in this country have grown; and the fact that the inequalities between neighbourhoods have grown at the same time has frequently been ignored. The contrasts have become more grotesque and demeaning for our city and our country. We must reduce the inequalities, partly for the benefit of those who are suffering in the worst-off neighbourhoods, but partly for the benefit of us all.

Some people have warned me that I should not talk about tackling inequality because the idea is perhaps unfashionable and unacceptable to those who are comfortably off, but that has never been my view of my fellow citizens. Those who are badly off want to be better off, but most decent people who are comfortably off do not like the idea that fellow citizens live in deplorable conditions, do not have jobs, are on low wages, have poor working conditions, are subject to high levels of crime and disorder and live in a polluted environment. I have always believed that most decent people want everyone to have a decent standard of living and a proper chance to play his or her part as a fully active citizen in our society and in this city.

It has been the proud effort of the Labour party in London for 100 years to try to tackle poverty. We have achieved enormous success in that the general level is so much better than it used to be, but the inequalities between the worst-off areas and the best-off are simply unsustainable—to use a fashionable word. We cannot have a sound and decent society, or a sound and decent city, unless we tackle those inequalities. Together with many colleagues here, I look forward to working in partnership with people all over London to bring about the changes that we all want.

11.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) on seeking and securing this important debate. He has made a characteristically

[Mr. Hugh Bayley]

trenchant speech full of detail and practical proposals on how to tackle poverty in the capital. Many of his proposals are on issues that the Government are tackling because he raised them in Cabinet when he was in the Government. He raised the real problem of the misery caused by loan sharks who bear down on poor people. The social exclusion unit has an action team on financial exclusion because of the lead that he gave in the Government. He is right to emphasise that the best escape route from poverty for the vast majority of people of working age is to find work. That is why London needs the kind of leadership that produces an environment in which jobs are created and opportunities are provided.

In addressing the problem of poverty in the capital, my right hon. Friend is right to stress the capital's strengths. It is a great financial centre, a home to business and a global leader in communications, arts and culture. It is one of the truly great cities, and because it has those strengths it has the ability, with the right leadership, to provide a solution to the problem of poverty. The strategy to deal with poverty in the capital will be one of the key issues in the election for London's mayor. Tackling poverty is obviously important to the one household in three in inner London that depends on means-tested benefits.

The problem is not simply for the inner city. If we pull back the net curtains in the suburbs or in prosperous parts of the inner city, we find poverty there, too. My right hon. Friend may represent an inner-London seat, but he has a long track record of sticking up for people on low incomes throughout the capital, as I know because I lived for a long time in Camden, in his constituency. He raised such issues when he was leader of Camden council, on behalf of both the people of Camden and Londoners as a whole. When he was first elected to it, the London borough of Camden was the only council in the capital that provided free travel to pensioners. Through his work, he spread travel concessions Londonwide. He did that even though people from Camden paid for a large part of it through the London equalisation scheme, because it was the right thing to do. It was right for pensioners throughout the capital, including in outer London, to have the benefits that they had in Camden.

Cutting poverty is not only an issue for the poor, because the existence of poverty in the capital imposes costs on people who are not poor. There are the direct costs of providing services for the poor, and indirect costs such as the quality of education provided in London's schools, the state of public open spaces and the fear of crime. Although the vast majority of the poor are decent, law-abiding citizens, crime in the capital costs people on higher incomes through their insurance premiums. It is in the interest of all Londoners, rich and poor alike, to use the capital's strengths to reduce the number of people living in poverty.

When people look back in years to come at the Conservative Government in the last decades of the 20th century, one thing will stand out dramatically: the alarming increase in child poverty. When the Conservatives took office in 1979, one child in 10 lived in a family in poverty. By 1997, one child in three lived in a household on less than half the average income after housing costs. In London, because of high rents and the high cost of living, the situation is much worse even than that: 44 per cent.—almost half of all the children in London, or 680,000 children—live in families with less than half the average income.

Children born into poor families are much more likely to be poor throughout their lives and to die in poverty. They are also more likely to die earlier. When my right hon. Friend was Secretary of State for Health, he published a report, "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation", which made it clear that a young male born in social classes 1 and 2 was likely to live five years longer than someone born in social classes 4 and 5.

Last year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made a pledge to the nation that we would seek to eradicate child poverty within a generation. It will not be easy to do so. When he published our proposals, people were aghast at the clarity with which we set out the indicators, but we believe that it can be done. Indeed, my Department is making a contribution through the reforms that it is making to the benefits system—not least, after years of its being frozen under the Conservatives, we have introduced the largest ever increase in child benefit. From April this year, parents will receive £15 a week for the first child and £10 a week for any others.

The Department of Social Security cannot eliminate poverty on its own. If we simply increase benefits, we shall lock more people into the poverty trap. The Conservative Government were extremely good at doing that: they doubled expenditure on benefits in real terms, yet they more than doubled the number of people locked out of work and into poverty. All Departments have a part to play, including the Departments for Education and Employment, of Health and of Social Security.

Nowhere is there a better example of that than in the Department of Health. The report "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation" makes it quite clear that the most disadvantaged are those who suffer most from poor health. Poor health is linked to community factors such as poverty, low wages, unemployment, poor education, substandard housing, pollution and crime. To tackle poverty, we need a community response: the sort of response that has been provided by the health action zones. For instance, in Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham, the "How's the Baby Feeding?" project is providing a partnership between the NHS and local people. Local mothers are providing guidance to other parents on feeding their children.

The health action zone in east London and the City has built a partnership with private sector sponsors such as Canary Wharf Ltd. and some pharmaceutical companies. It is addressing the issue of ethnic diversity in London by ensuring that health services are available in the 50 different languages spoken in the east of London. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security launched his poverty strategy at the Bromley-by-Bow centre, which links health services with other community support.

The Brent health action zone provides food co-operatives, welfare benefits advice and improvements to the school health service. My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras not only talks about poverty; he has a track record over many years of

tackling the problems of poverty within the capital. I cannot think of anyone better to lead an effective and sustained assault on poverty in the capital. His track record shows that. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is strongly committed to eradicating child poverty, and he is keen that someone with a track record such as that of my right hon. Friend should lead such a strategy in London.

If we are really to achieve our goal of eradicating child poverty, we need such an assault because 18 per cent. of all the children in Britain living in poverty live in the capital. If we do not tackle the problem there, we shall not achieve our national objective. We need to be clear why such an increase in poverty took place under the Conservative Government. It was primarily because they permitted such a huge increase—it more than doubled—in the number of families of working age in which no one had a job. We must reverse that trend.

We have made a start. We are reversing that trend with the new deal that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security helped to introduce immediately after the election. The new deal has already enabled 200,000 people to move from welfare to work, 30,000 of whom live in the capital. We have made an important start in the two and a half years since we formed the Government, but much more needs to be done. Of the 20 most deprived communities in Britain, 13 are in London. Three of the 10 local authorities with the highest unemployment rates are in the capital.

To tackle those problems, we need to create jobs. We need to create the conditions that encourage businesses to create jobs. That will not be helped by the proposal to levy a higher rate of corporation tax on businesses in London than on those elsewhere in the country. It will be helped by the constructive partnerships that my right hon. Friend proposes and that he has a track record of leading in the capital over many years.

Aircraft Noise (Gatwick)

12 noon

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I am sorry not to have been present for more of the previous debate, introduced by the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). Having spent many years working for the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) in the Child Poverty Action Group and many years working in Brixton and Peckham, I am well aware of how Londoners often fail to get child care, mental health and other services to which they are richly entitled. I also recognise the importance of cultural, as well as economic and social, regeneration.

I raise a subject of growing concern to not only my constitutents but those throughout the south-east. After I had the opportunity and privilege to address the House on the subject, many colleagues said that their constituents give a high priority to the question of aircraft noise. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith) and my hon. Friends the Members for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth), for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) and for Horsham (Mr. Maude) all asked me to say that it involves not only the people of South-West Surrey. It is causing mounting concern and growing anger throughout the area.

Benjamin Disraeli said that increased means and increased leisure are the two great civilisers of mankind. That may be the case—later today, for example, I shall open an international tourism and hospitality conference at Surrey university—but increased means and increased leisure, as well as the greater prosperity and regeneration of the south-east, are causing a massive expansion in air traffic, with the concomitant noise pollution. A great deal of noise is generated by the inexorable increase in air travel.

I am the first to say that the ever-lowering cost of air transport is another remarkable example of the democratisation of goods in our society. What was once a luxury for an elite few is now a way of life for many. What was once the jet set is now everyday set. We now have marvellous opportunities to reach all parts of the globe—but a growing price is being paid in terms of the effect on the environment and, above all, of noise pollution.

The chairman of British Airways, Lord Marshall, speaking on behalf of the industry at a conference of Ministers from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department of Trade and Industry, said:

> "It is abundantly clear to us that aviation growth, which we believe is crucial to UK economic growth, must be achieved within a sustainable environment context."

He went on to concede:

> "I admit freely that the aviation industry, in the past, has not been as sympathetic to community or environmental concerns as it could have been."

While airlines advertise their opportunities with great enthusiasm, there is another reminder of the ubiquity of air travel: the roar of the jet engine. Whatever the benefits of the technological revolution, which must not be underestimated, we need to ensure that it does not threaten our traditional and more serene way of life,

[Mrs. Virginia Bottomley]

which often finds its best expression in rural England. Every day, the home counties fear urbanisation, the erosion of the green belt and the pressure for development, which affects constituencies throughout the south-east. The pressure of growing aircraft noise is therefore all the more oppressive. For those in the countryside who happen to live on a flight path of major domestic and international routes, aircraft noise serves as a subtle reminder, every other minute, of the paradox of the opportunities for growth and prosperity on the one hand and the pressures on the environment and the quality of life on the other.

During the summer of 1997, residents in my constituency noticed a sudden and dramatic increase in the number of low-flying commercial planes approaching Gatwick airport, passing directly over villages and causing considerable noise disturbance. That has resulted in significant distress in a quiet rural area where previously aircraft noise has been only occasional, although near Dunsfold aerodrome residents agree that British Aerospace planes have not been a problem as flying and testing times are highly regulated and restricted, and intrusive for perhaps only an hour or two each week. As a result of those residents' complaints in 1997, Alfold parish council began talking to the British Airports Authority and air traffic control. The parish council chairman, Dr. Jenny Masding, was invited to sit on the Gatwick airport consultative committee. A resident for nearly 30 years, Roger Duckworth, wrote:

"there has been a huge increase in the number of aircraft passing over on their way to and from, Heathrow, Gatwick and Farnborough at a relatively low level and overflying aircraft going elsewhere. As a result, there are very few times in the day when I am not subject to the noise of at least one commercial aircraft. As one passes the next approaches."

His observation is instructive because it reflects so many of my constituents' comments. As a Member of Parliament for 16 years, I can tell the Minister that this is a new preoccupation. I have never heard such a volume and intensity of concern and complaint as I have over the past couple of years.

Noise disturbance from air traffic has continued and worsened since 1997, at times making life intolerable. The main problem is incoming aircraft when Gatwick airport is either operating in easterly mode—when the wind blows from the east—or is very still, as occurs in several different weather conditions. Figures from the BAA show that such conditions prevail for 45 to 50 per cent. of the time. Arriving aircraft fly level and low at relatively high power settings from 4 am onwards, which may continue all day until late evening.

Dr. Jenny Masding, the Alford parish council chairman, wrote to me:

"In the early mornings until mid day and again in the evenings the frequency is often one plane every two to three minutes. The effect on our quality of life has been disastrous. Sleep is impossible from 5 a.m. and often difficult before midnight. The noise is intrusive during the day ruining outdoor leisure pursuits and any pleasure in the use of gardens. In addition to this extreme problem of incoming aircraft, for the last year we now have outbound aircraft over flying parts of the villages when the wind is westerly. The numbers of these outgoing planes are increasing and at a lower level so that they are ever more intrusive."

That issue was brought to my attention by a remarkable, tireless and energetic group called the quieter skies campaign over a year ago. Bridget Bloom of the campaign has co-ordinated the efforts and given voice to members in Dunsfold and the surrounding area. Her dedication and professionalism have been greatly appreciated and respected by her neighbours and certainly by myself as the local Member of Parliament.

In passing, I would like to recognise the work of the British Airports Authority at Gatwick. Richard Hilton, for example, has attended meetings in my constituency and listened to the community's concerns. As a result, he is well acquainted with the problem and has provided valuable insight and information on the subject. The flight evaluation unit has made data available and always treats inquiries from me or my constituents with great courtesy.

I was worried about several radio programmes asking me whether I was critical of the BAA. I am not remotely critical; I am merely asking the Minister to strengthen its arm to tighten the guidelines and follow up several specific measures. BAA Gatwick is a private limited company and, as such, can only influence, not determine, operating policies. Only the Minister—I am delighted, as he knows, to see him here today—can create policy on such crucial matters as aircraft routes, speeds, altitudes, flight paths and time slots. I thank him very much for being with us today and for taking time to respond to the debate.

Everyone's goal is to find solutions that are acceptable to the airline industry, air traffic control and those affected on the ground. The key is to craft an approach that does not stymie London's growth as an international city, the development of the south-east region or Gatwick's emergence as an international hub. Our approach must be sensitive to safety considerations—for both the airborne and the earthbound—and, most importantly, we need new guidelines to decrease the current unacceptable level, frequency and duration of noise pollution.

Complaints and concerns have been increasing, as I have already stated. The *Surrey Advertiser* has been an excellent chronicler of complaints in that regard. On 12 November, it printed a letter from Mr. Woodward of Dunsfold:

"Over several months, the level of low-flying aircraft from Gatwick has increased dramatically; indeed, the increased level far exceeds the national growth in traffic volume . . . . To demonstrate why we feel so aggrieved, on Sunday October 24, between 4 am and 6 am, 30 aircraft flew directly overhead . . . one aircraft every four minutes. Some were flying well below 3,000 ft. . . . Noise pollution and disruption of sleep seriously affects the well-being of people and it is therefore the responsibility of the authorities concerned to take appropriate action to improve the current intolerable situation."

I entirely agree with that sentiment.

On 14 October, Peter Bugge, another Dunsfold resident and a former pilot—there are a great many of them around—recorded 11 out of 39 aircraft passing overhead between 4 am and midday at or below 3,000 ft. That analysis was provided by the BAA.

In another letter, Colin Hall said:

"It is clear that once tranquil rural areas now have aircraft much closer to them—in larger numbers, at lower heights, generating higher levels of noise—than ever before."

Dr. Jenny Masding, the chairman of Alfold parish council, has been active in trying to achieve a constructive dialogue and increase the attention that the subject receives. She said:

"The level of concern, anger and desperation felt by Alfold residents is increasing. A village consultation exercise was carried out in 1998 to assess what residents were concerned about and what actions they would like to see taken. A large percentage of the comments received on environmental issues were concerns about noise pollution from aircraft. The parish council receives regular desperate calls from residents concerning sleep problems."

The problem is different from any that I have seen during the past 16 years. As a result of that concern, the council organised a public meeting with the BAA in December 1999, and about 100 local people attended. The level of distress, anger and desperation expressed at that meeting was high and impressed, even perhaps distressed, some of the BAA staff.

In summary, the impact of Gatwick airport on the quality of life in Alfold, Dunsfold and many other villages is extremely alarming, especially as the BAA plans to increase turnover from 27 million to 40 million passengers in only five years. The frequency of night arrivals and the height at which they fly over the area is unacceptable, causing significant sleep problems. The tranquility and rest that people would like in their own homes and gardens are severely at risk. As well as the intrusion and stress that noise pollution causes, many people are worried about the adverse affect on property values of such developments.

The group with which I have had discussions has given much constructive and detailed thought to the matter. It has produced several specific and practical proposals, to which I hope that the Minister, with the BAA at Gatwick and air traffic control, will be able to give a positive response. First, on the routes of arriving and departing aircraft, terminal air traffic control requires aircraft departing Gatwick to follow clearly defined noise preferential routes up to a level of 3,000 ft. I understand that the level is 4,000 ft at Heathrow. When aircraft reach that level, ATC at West Drayton has adopted a policy of diverting aircraft on to their direct route even though they have not reached the end of the NPR. To raise the minimum vectoring level to 5,000 ft and require aircraft to follow NPRs strictly before vectoring off would lead to a significant reduction in ground noise. Clearly, we must ensure that aircraft follow their NPRs with greater attention. There is a mounting lack of confidence in the enforcement of NPRs. What can be done? What are the sanctions for aircraft disregarding NPRs?

Secondly, on the speed of arriving and departing aircraft, the ground noise from jet engines and body drag is significantly increased as the departing aircraft accelerate. Under an International Civil Aviation Organisation requirement, all aircraft should restrict their speed to 250 knots when below 10,000 ft. Although air traffic controllers in many countries insist on that requirement, it seems that the British standard has been more relaxed. We believe that it is crucial that those standards are incorporated in British air traffic service rules. The 10,000 ft level would bring the United Kingdom into compliance with European Union and other international controllers. I strongly urge the Government to adopt a policy that would require aircraft to adhere to the 250-knot limit while below 10,000 ft. What encouragement can the Minister offer? How can enforcement be strengthened?

Thirdly, on altitude levels, the quieter skies campaign suggests that policies should be adopted to extend and clarify the altitude levels of arriving aircraft. I understand that aircraft must reduce their height to 3,000 ft 10 miles from the runway in order to establish a final descent path. It has come to my attention that some aircraft are at or below that altitude well before 10 miles from the runway. To avoid increased noise caused by aircraft flying at low altitude, I suggest that all air carriers abide by the continuous descent procedure promulgated in "Air Pilot". I understand that aircraft could regulate their descent from 15,000 ft to avoid level flight at low levels over open countryside. That would reduce the impact of noise, especially in the early hours of the morning, and would have a major ameliorating impact on my constituents.

I gave the Minister my points in advance so that he could reflect on them. My fourth point relates to night flying. The rapid expansion in passenger traffic at Gatwick and the restricted number of slots available mean that it is only a matter of time before the airlines begin to request more take-offs and landing times, especially at night. At Heathrow, a limit has been set on the number of aircraft movements permitted between 11 pm and 6 am, which is fewer than that set for Gatwick. It would be greatly appreciated if Gatwick were to introduce equally restrictive policies. Only the Minister can enforce such a change. Surely the Gatwick area should be at least as protected as Heathrow.

Some might argue that such proposals may lead to increased fuel costs and higher ticket prices for consumers. It should be noted, however, that fuel and overall costs could be reduced as a result of such proposals. The relative cost either way is relatively insignificant in comparison with the real danger of the emergence of hostility and resentment against air travel in the area.

There has always been good co-operation and partnership with the people at Gatwick. This is a test point. The challenge that we face is how to combine social and economic growth with sustainable development, and how to expand opportunities without jeopardising the quality of life for others. The British countryside is admired the world over for its beauty, tranquillity and peacefulness. I urge the Minister to help to find a way forward.

12.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) for raising what is, as she said, an important issue not only for her own constituents but for anyone who lives near an airport. As she fairly acknowledges, air traffic has brought many benefits, although it also has a considerable downside. I shall do my best to reassure her on some of the points that she raised. She may want to follow up some of them by correspondence, as I anticipate that the problem will not go away.

Having holidayed four years in succession at Northchapel in West Sussex, just a little south of the right hon. Lady's constituency, I am familiar with some

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

of the area and some of the beautiful countryside in and around it. We must try to minimise the impact of airports on the environment. At the same time, our policies must and do take account of the economic benefits of a strong and competitive airline industry and we must provide sufficient airport capacity where it is economically and environmentally justified. One of the difficulties that we face is that everyone likes the convenience of airports but no one likes the inconvenience of living near one. One of the difficult tasks that the Government and other authorities must face is how to reconcile those sometimes not entirely reconcilable feelings.

The Civil Aviation Act 1982 empowers the Secretary of State to impose requirements on the operators of Gatwick, Heathrow and Stansted airports, and on aircraft using those airports, for the purpose of limiting or mitigating the effects of noise. The requirements imposed include departure noise limits, night restrictions, noise preferential routes for departures, and regulations for the management of arriving aircraft, some of which I shall outline.

A noise and track monitoring advisory group monitors the operation of the noise and track-keeping system, the core of which has recently been replaced by a more modern computer system. The group includes representatives from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and from the airport, consultative committee members and local authority officers representing the local community. National Air Traffic Services and the airlines are also involved. Gatwick also convenes a flight operations performance committee—there is quite a lot of jargon in this subject—known to its friends as Flopsy. The airline people and air traffic controllers on it examine technical issues.

At Gatwick the general trend, contrary to widespread belief, has been a diminution of daytime noise over the years as older, noisier aircraft have been replaced by quieter ones, despite a large increase in the volume of traffic. The annual noise contour reports, produced on behalf of my Department, tell the story. They show the equivalent continuous sound level experienced on the ground between 7 am and 11 pm during the busiest summer months. Over the past 20 years, the area of the 57-decibel Gatwick contour has more than halved. South-West Surrey, for example, now lies outside that contour and the level of noise experienced there should be lower. Gatwick operates towards the east in daytime, about 25 per cent. of the time on a long-run average. That can vary a good deal annually. In 1995, easterly operations were as high as 47 per cent., but that was exceptional. In 1998, the proportion was only 14 per cent.

Since 1968, my Department and its predecessors have stipulated noise preferential routes for aircraft departing from Gatwick. These routes are designed to avoid built-up areas and so minimise disturbance. However, it must be accepted that some dispersion from the noise preferential routes centre line is inevitable because of navigational tolerance, aircraft characteristics and, not least, weather, especially wind. In practice, that means that there may legitimately be a swathe of tracks of up to 1.5 km on either side of the nominal route. Compliance with this swathe has been improving: over 95 per cent. of departures in 1998–99 complied. Although deviations are not subject at present to financial sanctions, the causes of significant off-track flying are investigated thoroughly. The right hon. Lady and her constituents may be assured that considerable efforts have been and will continue to be made, by the airport and by airlines and controllers in co-operation, to improve compliance.

Once an aircraft departing Gatwick has reached 3,000 ft, air traffic control may, if traffic conditions permit, assign it a more direct course to its destination. That, as the right hon. Lady explained, is called vectoring. It is intended to speed up the flow of traffic, giving the benefit of being able to clear an area quicker and at a higher altitude. As a result there may be greater track dispersion once the required height has been achieved; but the amount of noise experienced by people on the ground will be relatively less than it would be at lower altitudes closer to the airport. The possibility, which she mentioned, of raising the Gatwick vectoring altitude to 4,000 ft is under consideration, but I am afraid there is no possibility in the short term of raising it to 5,000 ft, which is what she asked for; there is, she will be glad to hear, some movement on that point. In December, the release altitude for westerly departures turning east was raised to 4,000 ft. The possibility of a similar relaxation for easterly departures is also under continuing consideration.

The South-West Surrey constituency is around 15 to 25 miles to the west of Gatwick. It is inevitable that it will experience overflights. Two departure routes overfly the area when the airport is operating towards the west. Departures from Heathrow and elsewhere will also overfly, normally at a much higher altitude. Overflight at altitudes of 4,000 ft and more is a fact of life over a very large proportion of the south-east. We are not complacent and seek improvements where possible, but the noise heard on the ground must be taken in perspective with that from other sources that are regrettably endemic to modern life.

The right hon. Lady raised the issue of speed restrictions. There is, as she noted, an International Civil Aviation Organisation recommendation—not, incidentally a requirement—that a standard limit of 250 knots should apply below about 10,000 ft. That limit may be lifted tactically by air traffic control, as is done as a matter of common practice. That can be beneficial overall, helping aircraft to climb and clear the area more rapidly. The lifting of the limit by air traffic control does not, however, absolve pilots from responsibility to use speed and power settings consistent with the achievement of noise abatement procedures such as the noise preferential routes.

Arrivals—inbound aircraft—unlike departures, do not follow fixed routes all the way from home to touchdown, because that would remove the flexibility needed to direct aircraft to the final approach track while ensuring safe operation. Maximising the use of continuous descent approach procedures is of prime importance in reducing noise impact. Pilots at Gatwick are requested to use continuous descent as best they can, but air traffic control constraints—in particular, the need to maintain clearance from Heathrow departures—mean that 100 per cent. adherence is not always possible.

At night there is an additional requirement not to join the extended runway centre line below 3,000 ft—closer than 10 nautical miles from touchdown. I accept that that may bring more traffic over the Dunsfold-Alford area, but the rule benefits other areas that would otherwise be overflown more noisily and at a lower altitude. The Department's Aircraft Noise Advisory Committee recently concluded a study of arrivals noise that re-emphasised the importance of continuous descent: a technical report will be published shortly and a code of practice is being developed.

On night restrictions, we appreciate that noise from aircraft can be particularly disturbing at night. We operate a night restrictions policy limiting the number of aircraft that can take off and land between 11.30 pm and 6 am, backed by a quota system in which noisier aircraft count more than quiet aircraft, and the very noisiest are already precluded from operating at night.

The night restrictions regime is reviewed every five years or so, through public consultation. Following the 1998 consultations, the present night restrictions came into force on 31 October 1999 and will continue until summer 2004. I understand the wish of the right hon. Lady and others for a reduction to Heathrow levels of the movements and quota limits at Gatwick, but the Government had to make a balanced judgment, bearing in mind the different nature of Gatwick operations. Nevertheless, the former Minister for Transport in London, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), announced a progressive reduction in the Gatwick night quota, starting with the noisiest aircraft. I hope that that gives some small comfort to the right hon. Lady's constituents.

As to the possible expansion that was announced last March, a study of airport issues in the south-east and east of England, including, of course, Gatwick, will assess the economic, environmental and social impacts and we shall balance these before reaching a view about what additional capacity should be provided, at a particular site, or at all. This is not a blanket commitment to meet demand and then mitigate the environmental effects.

Much work has already been done to minimise the impact of Gatwick airport on the communities around it. We believe that more can be done: work on the wider policies is continuing, and in detail, so as to help to improve environmental performance. In the next few years we shall establish a framework to guide the development of airports for many years ahead. We shall work closely with all interested parties, including the communities affected by the airport operations, to achieve that. I am conscious that I have not been able to meet all the suggestions—many of them reasonable—from the right hon. Lady, but this is an on-going process and I look forward to a dialogue with her on the subject in the months ahead.

Human Genome Project

12.28 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): It is my view that the human genome research project will transform medical practice in the next 10 to 20 years. The nature of the changes will be dependent on those working in health care delivery and on the public's reception of the new health technologies. Hon. Members recognise that of course the future of health care is linked not only to research but to the future and functions of the national health service, with its on-going ethical and public debates.

The human genome project is being carried out at five main centres, one of which is the Sanger institute in Cambridge. In the next two or three years, the project will lay bare the total genomic information, which is the sequence of DNA written in an alphabet of four letters throughout our 24 pairs of chromosomes. That feat may be compared with unravelling the sequence of words, letter by letter, of 200 volumes of *Hansard*: the equivalent of two Parliaments' worth. There will be redundancy in both programmes: there will be many DNA sequences of whose function we will be ignorant, but that is also true of some of the words in *Hansard*.

DNA sequencing involves new technologies and partnerships across the world—naturally, there are arguments between scientists and boffins—and round-the-clock working using high technology. The results of that have been described as revoluntionary by scientists around the world and its implications equated with the discovery of the wheel. As DNA defines much of what we are, it promises to open up new vistas of understanding and activity in the pharmaceutical industry and health services. It will, for example, open up the possibility of molecular diagnosis of known genetic diseases, such as cancer, Alzheimer's and arthritis. No doubt, genes for other diseases will be discovered in the next few years.

That will be a huge advance, as we shall be able to target drug therapies on an individual's specific molecular genetic defect. Drug design will be specific for each molecular fault, which will be a major change in approach to the treatment of diseases with multiple molecular causes, such as childhood leukaemias, which may have 15 different genetic clauses. There will be sub-classes of patients and potential patients who may be treated as a sub-population. We will be able to target individual populations, with a drug unique to their specific molecular aberration. That drug will be an effective, rational treatment, in contrast to the irrational sledgehammer treatments in medicine today, which have attendant side effects.

A microchip containing people's molecular disease profile will be available to them, should they require it. Those who are clinically normal will be able to predict illnesses to which they are clinically predisposed. Growing knowledge of genetic and environmental interactions, such as the effect of smoking on health and whether people have the gene for lung cancer, will allow people to say, "I'd better not smoke, as I have the gene for lung cancer." People will have such knowledge long before a lung cancer develops.

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

Other examples of environmental pressures are bad housing and the quality of diet, which affect social groups unequally. There are social class differences in being subjected to different sorts of environment. Preventive measures and the effects of environmental factors will feature much more prominently, as they will interact with genetic knowledge. Health is not isolated from the circumstances or environment in which people live.

The human genome project and the information generated by it will herald a health service in which patients are more knowledgeable. Combined with advances in telecommunications—with the internet, websites and so on—that will force on us another aspect of health care delivery. Doctors will have to be trained to cope with patient demands and new knowledge, and will be required to interact with other health service groups in order to translate such knowledge into treatments. Regional counselling services will not be competent to meet that large demand and more locally organised services will be needed, perhaps on a city-by-city basis. The James Justice Robertson model—I do not know whether that is the right way round, or whether it should be James Robertson Justice, as I am from the wrong side of the tracks and unused to doub-barrelled names—will become a thing of the past.

Teaching and training in genetics and counselling will be the consequences of the human genome project and will have to be on the medical curriculum. Continued learning by the same cohort of medical students will be essential as we learn how gene products interact and understand further intricacies of multiple gene interactions, for example in brain disease and even IQ. More understanding and less pontification should be the hallmark of the new doctor, and partnership between the higher education sector and the health sector should become the order of the day. New doctors for the new millennium, some might say.

A result of the human genome project will almost certainly be to reveal the closeness between DNA sequences or genes among certain organisms, which will be uncomfortable for many of us. The small DNA changes required to shift from ape to man will revise the debate between Church and science. We are already witnessing that in Kansas, where anti-evolutionary forces now operate in the education sector.

On the darker side of the revolution, however, are the activities of Celera Genomics, a private laboratory in the United States, which is hellbent on patenting every part of the human genome, thereby preventing free public access to important information for health care. Other companies are marketing their genetic markers for, for example, breast cancer. They sell them at astronomical prices and hide behind their patent protections. There must be some presidential and prime ministerial intervention at a high level to ensure that the behaviour of multinational companies, which are capitalist buccaneers, does not usurp such a large step forward for mankind. If J. Craig Venter is allowed to get away with his project, it will affect the partnerships developing between drug companies, charities and Governments to make information about the human genome freely available to the world through the bio-informatics system.

In another dark corner is the role of the insurance companies and their so-called right to know, which is being strongly debated and raises deep worries. The genome project will increase knowledge, and issues such as the availability of mortgages, health insurance, life insurance policies and long-term health care allowances cannot miss the scrutiny of the insurance companies. It does not take much imagination to see how those companies might use information about predisposition to diseases.

There is also the prospect that individuals might refuse genetic tests if they feel that they will be discriminated against or lose the chance to receive health care facilities. In the history of health care in the United States, there are many examples of companies discriminating in their hire and fire policies against groups of individuals who are susceptible to, for example, certain chemicals, as they might go to court and seek compensation. The same problem could arise with new genetic testing. Employers might be tempted to insist on such testing to "improve" their work force.

Government policies will clearly have a direct and indirect effect on those issues. For example, no significant practical changes in health delivery will occur without an effective method of disseminating information throughout the health service. At the same time, the public will be drawn into the debate through the media, and advantages and problems will receive the scrutiny of our unbiased press.

Many professionals in the national health service see the changes as a threat, and that suspicion is allied with the enormous strain that they are under, which is currently highlighted by the flu. There was absolute meltdown on the issue of genetically modified organisms, and the public turned against what can be argued to be a bona fide science that may have positive effects on food production. If the Government are not to repeat that meltdown, they must start to engineer technologically driven changes in the health service.

The ethical and legal questions need to be addressed, and I can touch on only some of them. I am afraid that the health trusts are unresponsive to the changes, and there is certainly no evidence that the Government have budgeted for the retraining programme, new equipment or a public debate on the issue. Nor, as I understand it, have they budgeted for new research investment in the project as it takes off into other horizons.

The case for a long-term health care strategy incorporating those problems is unarguable. If evidence-based decision making in the health service is to result in therapeutic effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, the human genome project must be tied together with primary care services and health technology assessments. There is currently a great divide between genetic knowledge and clinical practice. Only Government can organise beyond the fragments that make up our health service. With the human genome project, we can move the debate away from the misery of discussing the rationing of health care resources to a real debate on the evolution of rational care. Do the Government have such a strategy?

Genome research will turn medicine on its head. Diagnosis will depend on genetic tests. Patients will ask what chances they have of becoming ill, and we need to plan the restructuring of the national health service before the project comes to fruition.

12.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): It is entirely appropriate that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) should have chosen the human genome project and its effects on health as one of the first topics for debate at the start of the new millennium. He suggests that the results of that work will be as revolutionary as the discovery of the wheel. He is right. The scientific and technological achievements so far associated with the human genome project are arguably some of the finest to have been seen in the previous millennium—and the potential is greater still.

The human genome project has many implications for health and many applications in health care in the broadest sense, and my hon. Friend traced some of its potential benefits and effects. During the next five to 10 years, we expect to see the development and introduction of some innovative modern technology, including new and improved ways of diagnosing disease earlier and more accurately. Indeed, as he said, we shall be able to identify genetic predisposition to some diseases. For example, we may be able to predict susceptibility to coronary heart disease and design tailored preventive strategies to help people to reduce their personal risk.

Information from the human genome project will also be used to develop new drugs and therapies. We shall then be better placed to target those drugs and therapies to individuals whose genetic profile makes them better able to respond to particular treatments, and with a lower risk of side effects. That is the expanding area of pharmacogenomics, in which drugs will be made to suit people's individual metabolisms and the severity of their disease. That will obviously help us to target our precious drug resources to the most beneficial areas—to where they can make the greatest difference.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, we shall also be able to unravel some of the relationships between the genetic and environmental causes of disease and to identify the combination of life style and environmental changes that will help to reduce ill health. That opens the door to the development of new public health strategies that will benefit the entire population.

The potential of the human genome project cannot be overestimated. The Government's job is to harness that potential. My hon. Friend is certainly right to say that the genetic revolution is likely to change the focus of health care from diagnosis and treatment towards detection and prevention. It will also force us to embrace new ways of thinking about public health care in general. It also means new operating methods for the NHS. The important question is what the Government should do to ensure that the project delivers maximum health benefit.

Several factors need to be considered. I shall try to respond to the points raised by my hon. Friend, although not necessarily in order. First, we need to encourage an environment that will support the development of those new, safe and cost-effective technologies, drugs and diagnostic tests. Secondly, we need to be sure that the NHS can use those new drugs and treatments in the most efficient way. Thirdly, as my hon. Friend said, we need a work force who can keep up with those rapid developments and turn them into practical benefits for patients. Fourthly, we must establish a proper ethical framework to allow us to respond to the genetic revolution and to answer the complex ethical, legal and social challenges that scientific progess will throw up.

I shall run through the Government's approach in each of those four areas. We do not yet have all the answers, but we have the foundations of a strategy to respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by the human genome project. We need to encourage the development of new treatments and technologies to benefit human health. The pharmaceutical industry has already made a considerable investment in sequencing the human genome. It clearly believes that more rational approaches to drug design will be developed and that additional cellular targets for therapeutic intervention will be identified.

To make effective progress in this work, scientists could benefit from access to databases linking genetic profiles to health records. It is worth noting that public and private health care funders are currently considering the creation of a genetic database of about 500,000 individuals for prospective genetic research. Participation will be entirely voluntary, and electronic access to NHS records will be needed to ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

Ethical considerations can never be far from our minds as we consider the proposals. Even with an entirely voluntary database, proposals to give wider access to detailed patient records and tissue archives must take into account the complex issues of consent, confidentiality, privacy and public acceptability. My hon. Friend is right to say that there must be a properly informed public debate on such issues before we can progress.

My hon. Friend raised concerns about patenting the human genome. I certainly agree that patenting every part of the human genome would be unwarranted and undesirable. Fortunately, the aim of the human genome project is to make nucleotide sequence information immediately and freely available to the international research community without fees, patents or other limitations.

Encouraging widespread research is not enough. We need to ensure that new developments that offer real benefits to patients can be actively promoted and used by the NHS, while ensuring that public safety is not compromised. We already have, of course, a well-developed regulatory system, with the Medicines Control Agency—a world leader in the speed and thoroughness of its assessments. In future, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will also have a role to play. Its role includes the appraisal of the clinical and cost-effectiveness of innovative treatments and the development of clinical guidelines to help their effective introduction across the NHS. Along with and supporting NICE, two key systems are in place to help the NHS to respond to the challenge that my hon. Friend describes.

First, the national horizon scanning centre at the university of Birmingham, which is funded through the NHS research and development programme, identifies significant new developments that could impact on health and the treatment of disease. My hon. Friend is right to point out that early intelligence of those

[Yvette Cooper]

developments means that better strategies can be planned and implemented when they are ready to be taken by the NHS. The national horizon scanning centre is maintaining a watching brief on the outputs of the human genome project and assessing likely impacts.

The second system is the health technology assessment programme—an NHS research and development programme that selects mature technologies and interventions of current importance to the NHS and assesses their effectiveness. Such research and development feeds into NICE, allowing it to provide the guidelines across the NHS to enable the smooth take-up of those new technologies and interventions as they are developed.

My hon. Friend talked about work force issues and training doctors to keep up with progress in genetics. He is right to say that all the knowledge in the world is a fat lot of use if we do not have the trained staff to put it into practice so that patients gain the benefit of the new information. It takes significant time to train professionals to deliver specialist services.

My hon. Friend talked about new doctors for the new millennium. I would go wider and talk about new health care workers for a new millennium, because we need to recognise the implications and requirements right across the NHS work force, not simply for doctors. At present, medically qualified personnel represent the first port of call for the provision of specialist genetic services, but that may not always be the case as the genetic revolution begins to extend the role of nurses and other health care professionals into areas traditionally occupied by doctors.

All professional groups—whether doctors, nurses, genetic counsellors, scientists or others—will need education and training in the new genetics. New courses will be needed. New programmes of continuing professional development will need to be put in place so that people are up to date with the new developments and the advantages that they can bring. That means good dialogue between those in the NHS who need the courses and training and those in higher and further education who may provide them. Such dialogue exists, but the genetic revolution highlights the need to extend it and ensure that we are able to respond swiftly to rapid developments and change.

We must ensure that the right number of professionals is given access to all the pre and post-registration courses that they need. We must further develop the world-class centres that exist in the United Kingdom for teaching and researching genetics and for delivering high-quality genetic services.

The technical and logistical challenges posed by the human genome project are considerable, but we should not forget perhaps the most important issues: the ethical questions that rapid scientific progress in this field inevitably produces. For example, we need to have an open debate on informed consent. Confidentiality for patients is critical. Public trust in NHS professionals and institutions must not be undermined in any way. The question of who is authorised to release or gain access to genetic information raises complex ethical issues and must be subject to well-informed public debate. The right of individuals to know and understand their genetic profile may be paramount, but such matters have implications for blood relatives and children.

My hon. Friend rightly referred to the potential for genetic information to be used unfairly to discriminate, perhaps for insurance or employment purposes. Those are serious concerns, and we shall need to be vigilant to safeguard people against unfair discrimination as the technology develops. Insurance and employment matters have been the subjects of reports from the Human Genetics Advisory Committee. In the case of insurance, especially as the range of available tests grows, we are concerned that there should be no unfair discrimination on the basis of genetic test results. We need an appropriate regulatory framework to ensure that people are not deterred from having the tests that they need on health grounds simply because of concerns about insurance-related issues.

That is why we have established the Genetics and Insurance Committee, on which patients and the insurance industry are represented. That committee is drawing up a procedure for evaluating scientific and actuarial evidence on specific genetic tests. Similarly, we are concerned to ensure that there is no unfair discrimination in employment on the basis of genetic testing. The Government expect to respond shortly to the report of the Human Genetic Advisory Committee.

It is likely that the new Human Genetics Commission will return to those issues. The commission's role is to analyse current and potential developments in human genetics and to advise Ministers on their likely impact on human health and health care and on their social, ethical, legal and economic implications. It will advise on the strategic priorities for research and for the delivery of genetic services by the NHS. Finally, and perhaps crucially, it will consult the public and other stakeholders to encourage debate and facilitate the development of better public knowledge and understanding of the many complex issues related to the outputs of the human genome project and its effects on health.

My hon. Friend is right to say that information from the new human genome project will force us to embrace new ways of thinking about public health, the prevention of ill health and health care delivery across the NHS. All those involved in the provision of medical service will be affected, whether they are part of the caring professions, part of the academic sectors, or part of the commercial sectors that serve them. The public should be able to gain an improved understanding of health and the causes of disease, so changing their expectations of health care.

These are exciting times and partnerships between all the key players in the public and private sectors will be essential to respond to the challenges and opportunities that will flow from the human genome project. We need to work together to promote research and scientific progress and to ensure that we have a competent health care work force to deliver the genetic services of the future. Most importantly of all, we all must engage in a public debate on the benefits, risks and consequences of the human genome project and all its spin-offs.

That represents a continuing and expanding agenda, and we certainly do not yet have all the answers. I hope that I can rely on my hon. Friend's support for the strategies that we need to develop and on his contribution to the Department of Health's development of strategies to respond to the human genome project in future. We must ensure that the project's outputs can and will be used to improve the health and well-being of the citizens of this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at six minutes to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 January 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Sub-Post Offices

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

9.30 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): This debate on the future of sub-post offices could not be held at a more appropriate time. The level of interest shown here today and the number of colleagues who have expressed an interest in the outcome of the debate demonstrate what a live political issue it is. During what I hope will be a relatively short speech—it had better be even shorter now, given the number of people who will no doubt want to speak—I hope to identify clearly that sub-post offices have a future, to illustrate by my own experience in my constituency how to deal with the problems that we face and to look to the future with interest and hope.

I have tabled this subject for debate because, in recent months, if my local and regional newspapers are anything to go by, the matter has become a live issue. So much has been written and so many column inches covered—or perhaps nowadays I should say column centimetres—that it is no exaggeration to say that the stories on the subject have dwarfed those on the dome, the flu epidemic and even what David Beckham wears under his football shorts.

I was told last night that my regional newspaper, the *Western Daily Press*, has collected some 150,000 signatures for a "save our post office" campaign. Much of that is laudable, because it displays the heartfelt love and trust that are felt towards local post offices—it is important that people also use their post office. The petition will be presented in due course; today, I want to examine the underlying causes of the current position and advance the debate, so as to secure the future of the post office network and put it in a stronger position.

My interest in sub-post offices is not new. Stroud is fortunate to be one of the first areas in the country to introduce the new Horizon system into its offices. In fact, the first two offices to do so were in Leonard Stanley and Kings Stanley in my constituency. Unfortunately, the former has since had to close for reasons beyond anyone's control, although it was pleasing to witness a community initiative led by the parish council, especially Phil Herbert and Jean Smalley, to try to reopen it.

During my investigations, and especially over the past few months, I have spoken to as many people as possible in an effort to understand the prevailing circumstances and what the future may hold. I have talked to Post Office Counters Ltd., the National Federation of Subpostmasters, the Countryside Agency, Stroud district council and the Department of Social Security Benefits Agency. I visited ICL Pathway in order to examine properly and explore the Horizon system and to talk to those responsible for its integration into every post office by the end of 2001. I also read the Select Committee on Trade and Industry's report on the inquiry into the Horizon project.

I have also visited, spoken to and corresponded with several sub-postmasters in my constituency, especially Penny Knibbs, the area secretary of the National Federation of Subpostmasters, who runs Kings Stanley post office, and Max and Ayreen Ahmed of Bath road, Stroud, who showed me how Horizon works in their businesses. Subsequently, I visited Tony and Vanessa Walsh at Chalford, who opened my eyes to computerisation in all its glory, and showed me how ways are being conceived to access the new technology. I have also been contacted by John Stone at Upton St. Leonards, Mr. and Mrs. Appleby at Painswick, Tony Hinsbey at Brimscombe, Maria and Rick Bailey at Frampton on Severn, and Simon Lewis at my own post office in Stonehouse. Many of my illustrative points depend on their views.

We are fortunate to have such a network. As hon. Members know, there are more than 18,000 post offices, spread throughout Britain. Although most of my speech will concentrate on the rural part of the network, many of my points relate just as much to market town or even suburban offices. I am sure that other hon. Members will speak from their own experiences and their own contexts. The sub-post office network is crucial if we are to stop rural decline. Although my interest is not exclusively in rural issues—I spoke in the debate on the Postal Privilege (Suspension) Order 1999 (Revocation) Order 1999 on 8 December—many of my examples will show how important the network is to the rural domain.

My main anxiety relates to benefits, and I start my analysis by examining the current hoo-hah about the payment of benefits. Hon. Members will know how important the payment of benefits is to the Post Office. Various figures relating to the extent of its importance can be cited, but the facility generates up to 35 per cent. of Post Office income. It is easy to cast aspersions on the decisions taken by and the motives of the Benefits Agency, whose decision to encourage recipients to have their benefit paid directly into bank accounts may have a serious impact on the revenue of individual sub-post offices. The possiblity of wholesale closure of post offices has become a major social and political issue, although, as I shall show, opportunities are available that match and outweigh that threat.

The decline of the network did not begin in May 1997, much as the main Opposition like to allege otherwise in certain publications that I have read. Statistics show that we have been losing post offices—mainly sub-post offices—at a rate of approximately 1 per cent. a year for the past 20 years. That decline has a variety of causes, not least because the post offices are independent small businesses that can fail for all sorts of reasons or, indeed, be closed for all sorts of reasons other than failure.

Automated credit transfer is part of a wider programme to computerise the post office network, the Horizon project, which was initiated by the previous Government and is being developed by this Government and ICL Pathway personnel. My hon. Friend the Minister for Competitiveness might want to make some comments about that, because allegations have been made about the decisions that have been made, why they were taken and their impact.

[Mr. David Drew]

Like the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, we should consider the implications of the adoption of ACT and whether it precludes smart card application. Many of us hope that it does not and that a middle way will be found that combines the best elements of the two. It has been suggested to me that we are dealing with a killer application. If we can implement the smart card, it will prove how beneficial that software and, indeed, the hardware that supports it can be, because it presents all sorts of opportunities. Likewise, it would be good to hear that, even with the introduction of ACT, the timetable of 2003 to 2005 is flexible and that we can monitor and evaluate the impact on the different parts of the Post Office.

Our bywords should be choice, responsibility and reasonableness—choice in that no benefit recipient should be denied the right to choose where they want their benefit to be paid; responsibility in that we should make it as easy as possible to provide payment to those most in need; and reasonableness in that the place where payment is drawn should be made as accessible as is practicable. In so doing, we highlight the advantages of the post office network. The opportunities presented to sub-post offices by the introduction of new technology throughout the network has been given far too little attention. If the postal network is to modernise and not be left behind by technological innovation, it needs to be positively encouraged and supported in developing new services that local communities will value and use.

Today's debate serves to highlight the vital role that sub-post offices play in their local area. The post office, often combined with the village shop, is the focal point for most communities, especially rural communities, which have already lost too much. The loss of such post offices, where they still exist, would be a serious blow to the vitality and sustainability of those communities, so it was pleasing to hear the Government's announcement over Christmas about strengthening the mechanism whereby local communities can appeal against the closure of their local post office. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Minister will tell us how that will affect the role of the Post Office Users National Council and local advisory committees.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): The hon. Gentleman makes many sensible points. However, does he accept that one of the main reasons for closure is that, when a post office becomes available for re-let because the person running it retires, the Post Office tries to reduce its opening hours, so creating the cause of the closure? An appeals system on whether a closure should take place will be no good unless an assurance can be given that the hours offered to the previous incumbent of a sub-post office will be offered to the new one.

Mr. Drew: That is a fair point. Clearly, every case is different and we must take each one on its merits. Businesses must be viable, and the more viable they are, the more secure their future is likely to be. We cannot exclude the planning system from such considerations, because people often have to get planning permission to open such a facility; more particularly, permission for change of use is involved when it closes. The decisions are intricate and difficult. We all await the performance and innovation unit report, which was initiated directly on the orders of the Prime Minister and is due out at the end of February. I do not wish to put the Minister in an invidious position, but I hope that we can debate the parameters of the report and examine what progress it makes and what impact it has on the Post Office Bill, which I hope will appear soon.

Sub-post offices provide a social as well as commercial service, especially to the elderly, the disabled and those on low incomes, who face isolation and social exclusion.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): If the sub-post office in a village in a far-flung rural constituency, such as mine and that of many other hon. Members, closes, how are elderly people to get cash? If they go by bus to the local town, which may be 15 or 20 miles away, it might cost around £5 or £6 and take a day of their time. If local post offices close, how does the hon. Gentleman envisage elderly people getting their weekly cash?

Mr. Drew: Constituents, especially those who run sub-post offices, have made that point to me. The simple answer is that we need to turn post offices into banks, or branches of a bank. If we can join that circle, we will get the best of both worlds. I hope that the ways in which we can secure the future of the sub-post office network will be highlighted in both the rural and urban White Papers, which are to come out after the PIU report—although I hope that, in the interests of joined-up government, they all come together.

What are the issues facing the Government? The Government want to modernise the service and have negotiated with the Post Office to make that happen. We are talking about a £1 billion investment in 18,000 outlets by the end of next year—a not inconsiderable achievement on which my hon. Friend the Minister might want to comment. We are talking about tackling benefit fraud and thus gathering a not inconsiderable saving, about addressing social and financial exclusion and about promoting sustainable communities.

The Horizon project, of which I am sure all hon. Members know something, is the method and mechanism by which that can be achieved. There is no alternative but to computerise the network. The vital questions are how that is to be done, at what speed, and whether we can get the best application from the project software and hardware, rather than allow it to become a missed opportunity. As I said, I have visited the ICL Pathway project and seen it in operation in the post offices in my constituency.

We will concentrate on the threat that that poses to the benefits system, without looking at the three benefits that it can bring, which I mentioned in the debate on 8 December. First, enhanced postal and communication services will make it advantageous for the Post Office to take back business from couriers, which exist close to almost every community. We have seen how that can be taken forward in various projects. Secondly, although entering the banking network is a somewhat fraught question, it is pleasing that a number of banks have already signed deals with the Post Office, such as the Co-operative bank—as a Co-operative-sponsored Member of Parliament, I declare an interest—Girobank and Barclays. Other banks have also entered or will enter into such arrangements. That needs to be encouraged:

although the Minister may say that it is not directly his responsibility, ways in which the Government can encourage the Post Office should be considered. Thirdly, there is electronic government—or, as the network refers to it, the gateway.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The hon. Gentleman may be right to say that technology offers potential in the long term. However, does he agree that the problem is short-term loss in income to those businesses and short-term lack of transferability of business? That is the real threat to the network. Once the network has gone, it will be very difficult to rebuild it.

Mr. Drew: The network has been depleted, but, rather than be defensive about that, I say that it should be opened up again. People do not talk about the other side of the coin—that it could lead to communities taking back their services. However, I agree that, unless we get hold of the issue, there will be a decline in service.

How can we advance in this respect? I am pleased that an electronic government group in Gloucestershire is examining co-ordinating services and considering what can be provided through the local government network. My challenge to the Minister is how to take that forward in national Government. With smart card technology, it should be possible for people to renew their driving licence or passport and engage in all the front-line services on which the Government annually spend around £8 billion. If we can tap into the major investment that is being made, as well as save the benefits business—people want to draw their benefit money from post offices—there will be real opportunities which will save the Government money and make the service much better and more accessible. All those benefits can give the Post Office and the various parts of the network a real competitive edge. It is about giving people the choice of where to draw their money from.

I have used the words choice, responsibility and reasonableness. I hope that everyone can agree with those objectives and see ways in which they can be taken forward in their own area. Community sustainability and social exclusion are important considerations: people often choose not to have a bank account or to use one because they prefer, for all sorts of reasons, to use their post office. That has something to do with social exclusion, but more to do with the trust that people feel for the institution. Why should they not have trust in it and want it to flourish? I have talked to people from a variety of backgrounds and to the Countryside Agency, which has tracked the future of the rural network in particular. It is pleasing to hear of the many ideas from Norfolk and Cumbria about improving the service.

What is on offer? Twenty-eight million people a week visit their post office, which must make it far and away the most popular service in the country. There are 18,000 outlets. People trust and believe in their post offices and see them fulfilling the community functions for which they were designed. We must overcome the benefits payment issue and be reasonable in giving enough time to allow a natural changeover. The problem is not insuperable and additional benefits may be derived from the solution to it.

In conclusion, I would like—with apologies—to compare the situation to a cake. We have baked the cake and now have a choice: we can cut it into slices, which means that the cake will ultimately crumble away, or we can put icing on it, to show people that it belongs to them and has a future. Only then can we receive all the benefits of using the service.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should like to say that, because many hon. Members want to speak, brief contributions would be appreciated.

9.50 am

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on securing the debate and on the thoughtful way in which he introduced it. It follows on from a debate on 15 July, introduced by my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. We have had two debates in a relatively short time on the subject of sub-post offices and the post office network because every Member of Parliament knows that post offices perform a vital function in our constituencies, be they rural or urban. The sub-post office is invariably a shop as well. It serves families, the elderly and the disabled. It becomes a focus for the whole community and helps to sustain it, especially in country areas.

My interest in the subject deepened when I became Secretary of State for Trade and Industry—or, as I subsequently realised I was, President of the Board of Trade. I realised that I had responsibility for the network and was instrumental in ensuring that we made a 1992 manifesto pledge to sustain a nationwide network of post offices.

When I moved to the Department of Social Security, my interest deepened further, as I saw how essential the network was to the effective delivery of benefits to many of the most vulnerable people in our communities. I helped to ensure that that delivery mechanism and the network would continue by agreeing to the Horizon project, about which the Government are now trying to rewrite history; I shall set the record straight. The contract was originally awarded to ICL Pathway because it had experience of setting up a similar system in Ireland, which, for historic reasons, has a similar network of sub-post offices. ICL Pathway had practical experience and we knew that it could do the job. We also knew that computerisation and mechanisation of the sub-post office system would be paid for by the potential savings from eliminating the fraud that was possible under the old order book system.

Contracts have to be not only signed, but managed. It is important that those who manage—Ministers—make sure that they know what goes on. I have always made it a practice, in business and in government, to ensure that I know the bad news, which travels slowly up large organisations. If the person at the top is no good, he will not know what has gone wrong. I asked always to be told what went wrong, as well as what went right. If there were problems, we addressed them immediately and announced the changes.

It is not clear that the current Government have been aware of what is going on—I do not want to go into the history at length, as I set it out on 15 July. We are still

[Mr. Peter Lilley]

waiting for answers from the Government. Why did Ministers assure the House—they did so on four or five occasions over two years—that the contract was proceeding and was likely to be completed on target by the end of 2000, but then suddenly perform a volte face? Were the Ministers who gave those assurances simply ill informed or did they mislead the House? The Select Committee on Trade and Industry concluded that there were suggestions that

"Ministers have been less than candid in their responses to the House and to this Committee"

about the problems facing the Horizon project. Unfortunately, the report was slipped out during the recess, so that grave indictment of Ministers did not receive the publicity it needed.

The only explanation is that the Treasury won. It has always been determined to close down the network of sub-post offices, if possible, to move to ACT and to make what it regards as a short-term saving in public expenditure. I doubt whether that saving will ever arise, and I doubted it when I was a Minister at the Treasury, at the Department of Trade and Industry and at the Department of Social Security. It was only when two former Chief Secretaries to the Treasury occupied the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Social Security that the announcement was suddenly made that the project would be scrapped and people would be compelled to have their payments made into bank accounts.

What really matters is not the history but the future and the consequences of that decision for some of our most vulnerable people. Fifteen per cent. of those on benefits do not have bank accounts, so how will they receive their benefits if they live in areas where sub-post offices have to close down because of the changes the Government are making? The Government admit that 1 million of that 15 per cent. of people could not reasonably be expected to operate a PIN number system because they are elderly or frail. Such people would be vulnerable if they gave PIN numbers to neighbours or others to receive their benefits. We need answers today as to how the Government will tackle the problems of people without bank accounts, and of people too elderly and confused to handle PIN numbers for themselves.

We want to know whether banks will be compelled to give accounts to those whose income derives solely from benefits, such as those who are dependent on income support and jobseeker's allowance. If they are to be compelled to take such people as customers, how will that be enforced? Which banks will be forced to take which customers? Will people have to pay a pound or two in bank charges from their benefits, which no one here pretends are excessively generous?

What will be the impact on families? Many wives use child benefit separately to pay for some of the needs of their children, as was specifically foreseen when it was introduced instead of a tax allowance. If that money must be paid into an account, and if a wife has only a joint account with her husband, how is she to keep the money separate for her children's needs? Must she open a separate account? Will she then have bank charges deducted from the child benefit paid into it? We need answers to those questions.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Is my right hon. Friend aware of an allied problem? When there is an overdraft, possibly for perfectly good reasons, the benefits money will go straight to pay off the overdraft, rather than to people in need.

Mr. Lilley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. That is why the existing arrangements have been satisfactory. They were largely introduced by the Labour party in 1978, so it is odd that it is now threatening and undermining them.

We need to know what the impact will be on the revenues of sub-post offices. How much revenue to the post office network will be lost because of the changes? If there is a saving to the Treasury, there must be a loss to the sub-post offices, but how much? What will be the subsequent loss to post offices through the loss of footfall—people coming into the shops, dispensing money and creating revenue? That creates no gain to the Treasury, but it is a loss to the system and so undermines its viability. Sub-post offices are very unusual in that people usually leave with more money than they had when they entered. They dispense some of that money in the process, but that will not be possible if their money is paid out through ACT.

How many sub-post offices will be closed throughout the country? If the Government are seriously determined to maintain a network of sub-post offices, will they not have to renegotiate the contract with Post Office Counters Ltd. as they do every two or three years? That contract is made up of two elements, one of which is about keeping the network open, while the other relates to actual usage of post office services. We will have to jack up the lump sum that Post Office Counters Ltd. is paid to keep the network open, offsetting any savings that it is making on the individual transactions; therefore, the saving that the Treasury is hoping to make may well prove to be illusory.

We must recognise that the Government's decision to scrap the Horizon project will damage the quality of life for disabled people, elderly people and families throughout the country. It will undermine communities, especially in rural areas. It is another threat to the countryside and, ultimately, it will be a threat and a cost to the taxpayer. Questions have been asked in previous debates, but they have not yet been answered by Ministers. I hope that we shall receive some answers today.

10 am

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) for enabling today's debate to take place. We all want to participate in it because we believe in the future of sub-post offices in rural and urban areas. However, if we are not careful, the debate will end up rewriting history and defending 18 years of neglect of our post offices. We have at heart the best interests of sub-post offices in our constituencies. I hope that this debate will ensure that they have a future and that their plight is taken seriously. That did not happen during the 18 years of

Conservative government—in fact, the majority of closures took place during that time. It is no use Conservative Members trying to defend themselves. The previous Government were guilty of turning a blind eye to the closures that took place throughout the country.

What can we do to save the future of the post office? I have received letters from those who manage sub-post offices. Mrs. Friend from Brindle in my constituency told me of her worries about the future for local people, and about what will happen to the post office and the business she runs. I agree with her that we must do something. There is a lot of uncertainty at the moment and the newspapers rightly publicise that worry. There are no two ways about it; we must explain what we want to happen and make sure that those who run post offices have a long-term future. Local communities will then become more settled, too.

We hear questions about whether all post offices should be able to sell tax discs, but tax discs alone will not make a future for sub-post offices. By all means, let them be able to sell tax discs and national lottery tickets and operate a new rural banking system for people who have so far been excluded from holding bank accounts. At present, high street banks want only a certain clientele; they operate an exclusion procedure for people who can hold bank accounts. We must ensure that high street banks face competition by opening a chain of rural banking facilities. That will put banking back into the rural community and allow all people in society to open a bank account. There do not necessarily have to be bank charges: free banking can be given to the people.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Rural post offices should always be able to dispense electricity tokens, which does not happen in all areas. Such a service will also help to sustain post offices.

Mr. Hoyle: I agree. Whether electricity tokens or stamps for gas and water, sub-post offices should be able to provide all the services that are offered by main post offices. We must ensure that sub-post offices have a future. We must remember that they are part of the community—they are probably the last piece of communal rural society. Many public houses have been converted into domestic houses and rest homes; they have been removed from community. Traditional butcher shops have gone. We are left with the post offices, which have become the newsagent and local shop. They are the last piece of the jigsaw.

We must add more pieces to the jigsaw to ensure the future of the sub-post office. Without doubt, we can achieve that and, hopefully, end social exclusion in rural areas. People on low incomes do not have a chance to hold a bank account. Furthermore, pensioners may not want a high street bank account—and rightly so because of their difficulty in accessing it. Bringing banking services to the rural community should be the Government's goal. We want to engage rural society; we want to ensure that there is no exclusion in rural areas and that there is a future for all sub-post offices. We must end the 18 years of closures.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Is the hon. Gentleman saying that technology should be used not to close post offices, but to expand the facilities available, especially in important areas such as Powys and Ceredigion?

Mr. Hoyle: I am sure that that will happen, especially when such places receive electricity—indeed, the two services might run in tandem in Powys. We should not take a luddite approach to new technology. We must embrace it and ensure that we all benefit from it, and that rural areas do not suffer exclusion.

10.6 am

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on enabling this debate to take place. I agree entirely that rural and sub-post offices have been promoting social inclusion for several years, well before the current Government began to implement their policies.

I also agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of choice. That is of great concern to many of my constituents. For example, at my surgery last month I received a deputation of 15 people from the community of Blairhall: they handed me a petition signed by nearly everyone in the community expressing concern about the future of the local sub-post office. People were especially worried about the possibility of benefit payments in cash being ended. Many similar representations have been made to me. By my calculations, villages in west Fife have 13 sub-post offices and Dunfermline has at least six sub-post offices. This is certainly a matter of concern to the many, not the few.

I accept that the current system of benefits paid in cash is costly, bureaucratic and open to fraud, but I welcome the Government's assurances that many people will be able to pick up their pension or benefit from the post office, if they wish to do so. I wish to pass on to the Minister questions that my constituents have asked me. Will the payment of a pension or benefit from a post office be in cash if that is what an individual wants? Will existing claimants be able to maintain their cash payments and will future recipients be able to opt for cash payments from their local post office?

Why is the claiming of cash payments from post offices so important? First, about a third of the income of sub-post offices is linked to the payment of cash benefits over the counter. It helps to make them viable businesses, especially because, as has already been said, many of them are also shops.

Secondly, the Government should accept that some form of saving is derived from the fact that many people—especially pensioners on low incomes—pay out a large part of their cash as soon as they pick it up. They pay their gas and electricity bills, or buy power cards and power tokens. That used to be the case in Scotland until the Post Office and Scottish Power ended their contract, which is a matter that I hope the Government will pursue. Pensioners pay for their television licence, telephone, rent, council tax and so on, thereby ensuring prompt payment of bills to large commercial companies and to central and local government. Those savings should be recognised.

Thirdly, many of my constituents have always relied on cash in hand to manage a very low income—whether a weekly wage or a pension. They take their money and

[Ms Rachel Squire]

immediately pay their bills so that they know exactly what they have left to live on. That has helped to keep people away from making demands on central and local government services—an additional saving.

Fourthly, picking up the point made by the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), I have met women for whom the only guaranteed cash that they have for their children for that week or fortnight is their child benefit. The problem exists in every constituency in the country. Women in relationships with unreliable husbands and partners cannot depend on money being put in their bank account, or on money that they have handed over being used to provide for the family. All too often, it is spent in the local pub, betting shop or elsewhere. That, too, should be recognised.

A fifth reason why cash payments are so important has already been mentioned: many people do not have a bank account. I reckon that about one fifth of the pensioners in my constituency do not have a bank account and do not want one. Having cash is how they have managed their money all their lives. The banks are not interested in them. In the west Fife villages, where there are 13 sub-post offices, there is only one small bank branch. To those who have spent their lives following the rule, "neither a borrower nor a lender be", the idea of paying bank charges or living on credit is totally alien.

Although I accept that payments in cash and the use of order books can be open to fraud, the Government must recognise the value of staff at sub-post offices being easily able to detect a stranger who comes through the door, or someone who tries to claim cash using an order book that the staff know does not belong to that individual.

I support my hon. Friends the Members for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) and for Stroud and many others who have urged the Government to look at ways of combining the tradition of sub-post offices with innovation. They should consider introducing cashpoint systems and using other means to attract even more business. Sub-post offices in my constituency have an arrangement whereby repeat prescriptions can be either collected by pensioners, or delivered to them, thus saving a costly bus trip. Why cannot other systems of shopping be developed, so that sub-post offices can become even more of a focal point for the community?

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister and the Government will recognise how crucial sub-post offices are in maintaining strong community links. It is possible to combine the tradition and innovation—to look at new ways of working, while ensuring that policies of social inclusion continue to be delivered effectively and well by the sub-post offices in our communities.

10.14 am

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I congratulate my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), on securing the debate and on his characteristically thoughtful and well-informed contribution. The hon. Gentleman and I tabled an early-day motion on the subject some weeks ago, which attracted support from hon. Members on both sides of the House. The turnout today is indicative of the support that there is for sub-post offices.

The drafting of our early-day motion revealed the Government's lack of honesty about their intentions. The original draft was suggested by the National Federation of Subpostmasters. The federation used the C-word—not choice, but compulsion. I asked one or two hon. Members whether they would be willing to state that they were unhappy about the compulsion to have money paid into a bank account; they said, "No, it will not be compulsory," but this is the Government's intention. I hope that the Minister will be honest and use the C-word—compulsion, rather than choice.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry wrote to the Federation of Subpostmasters in a letter that was meant for publication that he envisaged that all benefits would be paid into bank accounts by 2005. Answers from the Department of Social Security have said that payment into bank accounts will be the norm, with limited exceptions. I asked what "limited execeptions" meant, and the only example that I was given was those who are bankrupt—not poor people who did not have bank accounts. In other words, people will not have a choice. If we are about anything in the House, we should be about choice.

There is evidence that people do not want to be forced to have bank accounts. Child benefit and the retirement pension are the two benefits that are most likely to be paid direct into bank accounts. Barely half the new claimants of those two benefits opt for payment into a bank account, despite the loaded question that they are asked. For income support, which presumably applies to the most vulnerable in our communities, the figure is just 10 per cent. Nine out of 10 income support recipients do not choose to have their money paid into a bank account. How will they be provided for?

Although we have talked about 2003 and 2005, I warn my hon. Friends and others that things are already starting to go wrong because of the working families tax credit. I tabled a question recently, which revealed that the working families tax credit, which currently can still be paid through sub-post offices, had 300,000 new awards in the 10-week period before Christmas paid by giros in post offices. Three hundred thousand people went to post offices to pick up their working families tax credit, as it is now called. From April this year, virtually none of those 300,000 claimants will go to post offices. Lone parents will be forced to receive the credit in their pay packet, as will most others. The damage is being done now, so today's debate is timely.

The cost of an ACT payment is 1p, so the Government will save a great deal of money by switching to ACT, but how much of that saving will post offices retain? It is not good enough for the Government to say that people can still use a post office if there is no post office there through which the money can be delivered. If we go over to ACT, what will post offices get for handing over the cash that has gone through a bank account, for acting as an agent? Unless it is comparable to the sums that they currently receive, the measure will tip many post offices that are already on the borderline over the edge.

It is not sufficiently reassuring to tell my constituents that they can still go to a post office, unless they are sure that one will be there. I hope that the Minister will give an assurance that, for the foreseeable future, the sum that post offices receive for handling transactions and

for acting as agents for banks will be comparable to that which they now receive. If they lose such a vital stream of revenue, many will simply cease to exist.

10.18 am

Mr Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am pleased to contribute to the debate introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). I hope that he will forgive me if I have not recorded every elector in his constituency—we had a fair spread. Like everyone else, my speaking time is limited, so I shall not dwell too long on the benefits of the proposals.

In the age in which we live, like it or not, computerisation is with us. If post offices are to compete in the financial world, they need to be udpated with such machinery. It would be foolish to stand against that trend, so the scheme must proceed. I also understand the benefits that will come from reducing fraud in the collection of benefits, if there is a move towards direct payment.

Like other hon. Members, I am concerned, first, about the consequences for the poor and elderly in our communities if real choice disappears and, secondly, about the financial effect that such a lack of choice will have on small post offices. I have a letter from the Department that says that people will still have a choice, but the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) doubts that. I look forward to the Minister's conclusive answer on that point.

There is a difference between choice and choice: between the choice that leaves people free to choose and the choice that people were given in plebiscites in middle Europe during the 1930s—woe betide those who did not vote for the winning side. At the moment, it seems that direct computerised payment into bank accounts is winning. A constituent from Essex kindly sent me a copy of a child benefit form. It claims to be a letter, but it is a standard form, the main purpose of which is to encourage people to receive their child benefit every four weeks in arrears instead of weekly. There are exceptions, but that is a subject for another debate.

That form mentions choices of the method of payment, but not much emphasis is put on payment by cash: the choice is mainly between direct payments, either through the bank or building society, or through Giro or the Post Office National Savings bank. One can choose to receive cash, but that is not made abundantly clear; indeed, when the letter was sent to me I was told, "There is no choice." We must make it abundantly clear that people do have a choice; equally, those who campaign for rural and suburban post offices must say, loudly and clearly, that people have a choice. Those of us who fear the loss of post offices may be agents in engineering their end if we do not encourage people to exercise their choice in favour of cash.

Choice is not sufficient in itself. Every person who moves to direct payment will be one person fewer going to the post office, which means one small item of cash revenue less for the post office. That will result in fewer people buying Mars bars or boxes of tissues—or whatever else people buy when they go to the post office. That will be equally true if they go to the post office only once every four weeks rather than once every week; the number of visits to the post office will be diminished and the number of purchases that can be made will be reduced. Small village post offices operate on narrow profit margins. A few people electing not to use them may make the difference between profit and loss, staying open or closing.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said, post offices have been closing for many years. In the village where I lived 25 years ago, the post office was to be found in a man's house. When he retired, the post office disappeared because no one wanted to take it on. I went back to that village recently, and there is still no post office; there is no longer a chapel, any form of shop or a school. The village post office, the school and the village shop are all part of the chain of community that has rapidly disappeared. I realise that other factors are involved: for example, as villages become home to commuters or weekenders, less purchasing power is available to be used in the post office.

Banks seem almost to rule the world these days—I hope that it is not terribly unfashionable to say so—and they work on computer systems. If post offices are to operate on equal terms with the banks, they, too, will need to use a computerised system. As mentioned earlier, they will also need to be able to act as the village, small town or suburban bank. Not only are banks unable to fulfil that function, but they seem almost purposely to have gone out of their way not to fulfil it. Within a two-mile radius of my law office, there used to be five branches of Barclays bank; now, there is only one.

I regularly go to the bank in Earls Colne, one of the villages in my constituency—except that it is no longer a bank, but the office of the National Farmers Union. We can go to lots of banks that are no longer banks but restaurants, printing works and so on. The choice is no longer available. All of us know of villages that have lost their banks or that have only one branch hanging on by a thread. The post office could be the answer to that problem, but we must ensure that it still exists, that customers still use it and that it still forms part of the community.

The newest phrase is "social exclusion". We use some funny phrases nowadays; I wonder whether people in the countryside understand what we are talking about. One of the biggest factors that makes people feel socially excluded is new technology that they cannot use or that they are not minded to use. For instance, if I were to start talking about Switch cards and PIN numbers to an 80-year-old who has lived all her life in the countryside and has never been further than 50 miles from her place of birth, she would not have a clue what I was saying, and I can understand why. We are creating the mechanisms that prevent such people from taking advantage of the benefits that are being created. However, it is worse than that: we are also taking away from them things that they have known all their lives. Because of the decisions that we and the world have made, some of their local—and social—facilities no longer exist.

Although I welcome progress, hand in hand with it must go the public assurance that traditional methods of receiving pensions and benefits will remain intact and on an equal footing with computerised banking. That must go at the same pace as the Government's initiatives to ensure that post offices enjoy full clearing bank facilities and to turn them into local bank branches.

10.26 am

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): I, too, congratulate my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), on securing this debate. Many hon. Members are worried about the future of post offices, and those who represent rural seats are deeply concerned about the future of rural post offices, which are often the only service centre within their communities. Rural post offices are vulnerable. It is interesting that my hon. Friend did not say that the future of the sub-post office was rosy, but many of us think that it would have been better if he had said that it was bleak. The policies of local authorities and of Government are not improving matters. It is crucial that rural post offices are not only service centres but that they become financial centres. As other hon. Members have said, they should become rural banking centres.

I am concerned about the performance and innovation unit's December 1999 report. It was about rural economies, but contained not one mention of post offices or the financial services that they provide. It spoke at length about the need to build up IT centres, business link centres and financial centres, but no mention was made of the role that the post office already plays. I hope that the rural White Paper takes closer note of the post office network and ways to enhance it, so that we can have the financial centres that we need in rural areas.

In the Forest of Dean, that change is beginning to happen in a big way. Ruardean Woodside post office is small but necessary. It is running the first of eight pilot schemes in Gloucestershire with a grant from Gloucestershire rural community council. It has set up an information site, and it has access to Glosnet. One can e-mail from there, use the worldwide web, use the system as a word processor, print from it and do all the things that can usually be done in a telecottage. Because of the grant from the rural community council, it is being provided free to the local community, and people pay only for the telephone charges. It has been most successful, and it has brought more people into the post office, especially kids doing their homework. Such a project can help to prevent information poverty in rural areas.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a danger of social exclusion for the information poor? Will she go further and join me in urging the Minister to consider introducing a citizen's entitlement to time on the internet, for which post offices could serve as the access point?

Mrs. Organ: That is a very good suggestion, which might be the way forward for local post offices.

I have two issues for the Minister arising from my meeting with rural postmasters in my constituency. They expressed concern about the future, 2003 and the changes to the payment of benefits. First, I hope that we shall retain choice. Many people cannot have a bank account—indeed, many people would not be able to use one, have never had one and do not know how to start. I want people to have a real choice, so that they can get their cash over the counter. I also want to know what my hon. Friend the Minister means by cash. Does he mean a cheque that has to be cashed or the current system?

Secondly, the Government and the Post Office could set up an advertising campaign, or the Government could put money into advertising services already provided by the post office network. Post offices currently provide 162 services, but we are not even aware of some of them. People can obtain health insurance, foreign currency and a range of other services at post offices; if they knew that, they would use post offices more. The Post Office does not have the money to do all the advertising, but I hope that the Government and the Post Office will invest some money together, so that the Post Office can extend its services and make people more aware of them.

It is crucial that post offices remain in our local community. The local post office should be the financial centre and the social centre of rural communities. Many rural post office staff are very aware of the people they serve and notice when, for example, a pensioner does not come in to pick up his or her pension. Those staff fulfil a social function as well as a financial one, and they must have a rosy future.

10.31 am

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) for initiating the debate. He may be building up a record on the number of times an hon. Member has been congratulated in a single debate. I also congratulate my local paper, the *Western Daily Press*, on its campaign against the Government's plans to pay benefits directly into the bank. I believe that it has so far collected about 150,000 signatures for its petition.

Much has been said about the importance of post offices in the community. They give people in their area a chance to meet, interact and, most importantly, to access vital services that they need in their everyday lives, which might in future include the internet. The post office is at the centre of community life, especially in rural areas but also in towns. The sub-post office is also a small business. About 90 per cent. of the post office network is run by small business people, and a recent report asserted that about 90 per cent. of small businesses with fewer than nine employees used post offices for banking and deposit facilities, for obtaining cash and for access to mail services. That is an important aspect of the service provided by sub-post offices.

Postmasters and mistresses are concerned that they will lose money because of the reduction in Benefits Agency business and that related problems will build up. They are concerned that, if the Government's plans go ahead, by 2005 they will have less business from benefits. They believe that it will be difficult for post offices to be viable, even if they are given extra business.

I agree with comments made by other hon. Members about freedom to choose how our benefits are paid. My hon. Friend the Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) made some key points, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response. Having visited several post offices during the recess, I was concerned to hear that people read the letters sent to them and assumed that they had to ensure straight away that their benefits were paid through the banks. Perhaps those people did not read their letter well, although some have suggested to me that it was misleading. Several post office staff told me that they would like to display a notice in their post

offices informing people that they can still get their benefits paid there. What is important is that many people appear to have been misled, whether intentionally or not.

I have referred to the importance of sub-post offices both to and as small businesses. Many people have put their savings into a sub-post office with a view to retirement or selling up. Such people feel dispirited that they may not now have a resource to sell. We are concerned about closures of sub-post offices not only because of their impact on rural communities and communities generally, but because of jobs. A recent survey conducted by the National Federation of Subpostmasters states that as many as 30,000 jobs will be lost if the predicted number of sub-post offices closes because of the Government's action. That is concerning, especially as many sub-post offices are situated in rural areas where jobs are difficult to find.

The Minister has been reported as saying:

"In many ways the Post Office has had an unhealthy over-reliance on benefits work."

It may be fair to say that, but it is not an answer. We want the Minister to answer today. The benefits work given to post offices was felt—especially by sub-postmasters taking on the job of running sub-post offices—to be an integral part of their income. The removal of that income will worry sub-postmasters and be a defining point for them.

The issues to which I have referred are clear and are relevant to all constituency Members of Parliament. Some of those issues might be regarded as small, but the ability of retired people and people on low incomes to go into a post office, to obtain their cash and to decide what to do with the money on that day is very important. Sometimes such people will want to spend a little bit here and a little bit there or buy a Mars bar, as the hon. Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) said. All such transactions help the local community, perhaps through a nearby shop. It has been pointed out to me that sub-post office staff are aware of local people: they are likely to notice if an old person does not arrive to collect a benefit payment and to try to find out whether that person is ill. Such action can often be the first line of defence for vulnerable people.

I hope that the Minister will have time to deal with all of the points made, so I shall draw my remarks to a conclusion. I hope that he will convince us that things will not be as bad as we believe. I look forward to hearing his comments.

10.37 am

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Today is a marvellous opportunity for the Minister. Since the debate on post offices in the Chamber on 15 July, which was initiated by the Conservatives, hon. Members have had the chance during the long summer recess to visit post offices in their constituencies to see how they are coping with the changes facing them. We have heard about some such visits today. We have also had the chance to hear post office staff's predictions on how the Government's policy decision of May to move to ACT payments will affect them. As a Front-Bench Member of Parliament, I have insisted when visiting the constituencies of other hon. Members on being taken to local post offices. The picture is the same throughout the country, wherever one goes, whether it be Wales, England or elsewhere. Hon. Members of all parties have expressed grave concern about the impact of Government measures on communities and individuals and about the future of sub-post offices.

At the beginning of the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) spelled out clearly the track record of the Conservative party. The hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) had a good go at the party, as he usually does, but the facts are clear. When we left office, we left in place a framework in which the future payment of benefits through post offices would continue, funded from the taxpayer by remuneration made through Post Office Counters to individual post offices. That function represents, on average, 30 per cent. of post offices' annual revenue.

As we have heard, the Labour Government not only accepted that policy, but told the House of Commons in both oral and written answers that the new Horizon project was going ahead, that all would be well and that they were trialling it. They gave the impression that, apart from one or two hiccups with the technology, which were being overcome, we had no reason to believe that any substantial changes would be made.

Mr. Hoyle: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not mind, but I have only a short time to speak.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on bringing the matter to our attention again. Unless the Government reconsider in short order, we shall pass the point of no return. I should say that we are already passing that point. I have a huge rural constituency containing more than 50 sub-post offices. Post offices often come up for sale when those running them retire and want to dispose of them. Those considering taking them on look and say, "In two years' time, we will have to run the business"—and they are businesses—"with a 30 per cent. drop in revenue." The Government flagged up during the summer several proposals in the pipeline to boost the revenue and the viability of those businesses. If the measures have common sense and tangibility behind them, I welcome all of them.

The use of computers will help especially the tiniest post offices to offer a range of services. In my constituency, some really tiny post offices do not have room even for a proper shop—they have a few postcards, a bit of stationery and that is that. Being able to sell tickets and to provide other services will be a help, but we should not forget that we are poised on a technology revolution whereby ever more people will be able to access services at home through either their PC or, as we see coming up and as is more likely, through interactive digital television. Post offices will not be able to offer services exclusively, helpful though that might be to pensioners unable to access them otherwise.

Let us not think that the computer in the post office will solve post offices' problems—it will not. I was concerned during the summer when we heard that the Post Office was to join forces with Camelot in the new lottery bid. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry immediately announced that that would be a great help to post offices. I question that view because it

[Mrs. Browning]

will not be viable to put a lottery terminal in a rural post office or shop, unless it can process 3,000 transactions a week.

The Government have shown one of their hallmarks. They have taken a Treasury-driven political decision to save £400 million a year for the taxpayer or, rather, for the Treasury, because the taxpayer would be willing to see the money continue to be so used. They have created a huge problem and are now clutching at straws to discover how they can shore up the situation and solve it.

I should say to the hon. Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) that people have been assured that they will be able to collect their benefits in cash. There will be a transaction between the clearing banks and whatever form of terminal is in a village post office, if there still is one. The Government have failed to answer the question, although we have repeatedly asked it, about who will bear the transaction costs. Again, they do not seem to have a clear view of how they will process and advance that.

The Minister recently appeared in national newspapers saying how concerned he was. He knows that I genuinely have great respect for him. He is well placed in the House to know the post office sector and to feel from the heart its need for a future. The answer is in his hands. He is the one person present with the power to do something about the problem with which we are all concerned. He is not tainted by having served in the Treasury. Will he please stand up to the Treasury? We have already heard that it is unlikely to save that much money. There is time—just—to think again, to change the decision and to advance the matter so that we will not have to keep coming to beg the Minister to save our fragile communities.

10.44 am

The Minister for Competitiveness (Mr. Alan Johnson): It is a great pleasure to reply to the debate, which is not the first on the Post Office with which I have dealt. There have been three such debates, and an Adjournment debate on this precise issue soon after we returned from the summer recess.

I should like to join the fan club of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) and perhaps to become its honorary secretary, and thank him not only for having raised an important and currently vital political issue, but for the way in which he addressed us. His speech was balanced, intelligent, well informed and, most of all, it was about the future of rural post offices rather than the past.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) touched on an important aspect of the debate. If we are not careful—if we surround the debate with gloom and doom, as if it is about a negative future for post offices—we shall create the very climate that we should all be seeking to prevent.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Will the Minister reflect on what he has just said? He said "rural post offices". They have dominated the debate, but will he accept, as I do, that we are considering a national network and that the situation also affects urban and suburban post offices?

Mr. Johnson: I agree absolutely, and I shall address the matter. It is important that I put the Government's position on the record during the debate.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud made clear, it is important that we consider the matter constructively. The beauty of this and of all other debates on the Post Office is that I have an opportunity to reassure hon. Members again of our commitment to a nationwide network of post offices.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) mentioned what happened in the past. We are unable to access some of the records from the benefits payment cards project. The project was well intentioned, and I supported it in a previous capacity. However, when we took office, the contract was running three years late and was vastly overspent.

Mr. Lilley: If the project was running three years late when the Government took office, why, on four occasions over two years, did Ministers assure the House and the Select Committee on Trade and Industry that it would be complete on time by the end of 2000?

Mr. Johnson: I shall correct that. It was running three years late when we took the decision to move to the new arrangements. When we took office, the contract had already been renegotiated; and it had been established in May 1996 and renegotiated in February 1997. I was party to those discussions in a previous capacity. The previous Government spent two years trying to privatise the Post Office, two years trying to plunder it and a year establishing a well-intentioned project that the Trade and Industry Committee said was "blighted from the outset".

On assuming office, our choice was between continuing with a failing private finance initiative scheme running well behind schedule and well over budget, and getting a proper grip on the issues through a workable arrangement to computerise the network with a phased approach to the migration of benefit payments to ACT. There is no doubt that the process has accelerated, is accelerating and will accelerate. There has been a concerted and co-ordinated push to attract new business.

Had we not created the need to consider the future, we would not be having the debate. The post office network that everyone is applauding, saying how vital it is to our communities, has been seeping away at the rate of 1 per cent. a year for the past 10 years. There would have been no debate. The choice might have been easy for Government—to leave alone and to walk away, with it becoming someone else's problem in five, six or 10 years' time. There would have been a continual, gradual decline until it became too late to do anything about it. The push to attract new work for the network and the discussion about getting network banking back to rural areas that lost it years ago is a crucial element of the debate. It is also important to take advantage of the computerisation from 2001 and the access criteria that we are introducing, which will be established in law and

monitored by an independent regulator so that the random effects of the past 20 years' gradual erosion can be tackled.

We recognise that there are concerns about how the matter is being approached and the requirement for what today's jargon calls a cross-cutting response from Government, if what we propose is to be successful. That is why, on 21 October, very quietly and before any local newspaper campaigns or fuss in the press—in fact, we tried to make more of it than we managed to, probably because of my inexperience as a Minister—we announced that the Cabinet Office would set up a performance and innovation unit study, reporting directly to the Prime Minister, to identify post offices' contribution to the vitality of communities; to consider how the post office network could best contribute to the Government's objectives for the future; and, in the process, to formulate objectives for the network itself. The report is important. It takes into account ideas such as internet cafés and bringing back services such as electricity payments in Scotland; I, too, remember that those disappeared years ago.

The transition from paper-based methods of paying social security payments to ACT does not start until 2003—a full three years from now. I know of the fuss about the letter sent by the Benefits Agency and mentioned by several hon. Members. I do not have time to explain that, but I assure hon. Members that child benefit payments have been paid monthly since 1982; there was no change in that respect. Some ambiguity was found in the relevant form, but we are tackling that. It was a one-off exercise that will not be repeated. The implications of the transfer to ACT are being given particular attention in the PIU study. We are taking positive and concrete steps to establish a framework for the network's future.

Of course, we are computerising. By spring 2001, we shall have dealt with the whole vast network—vast even after it has shrunk: if W. H. Smith, Tesco and Boots were added together and multiplied by 10, they would not amount to the Post Office network of 18,500 offices. To computerise it at a rate of 300 offices a week is an immense task which is being undertaken very successfully. We are up to date and the new project will produce a proper computerised network which will be essential to the future of the business.

The access criteria that we are planning to announce in the next few months will be the benchmark against which the Post Office Users National Council—revamped and given more teeth—and the new independent regulator, the Postal Services Commission, will monitor the Post Office proposals for the network and its evolution. For the first time, there will be a requirement in law for close, independent monitoring of the nationwide network of post offices to ensure that proposed closures that would present significant problems of access to Post Office Counters services will be taken up with the Post Office and ways of maintaining access investigated.

The question that was raised about how services might be guaranteed should a sub-postmaster move away misses the point, which is that post offices have closed and that prestigious, main post offices on the high street have been converted—that took place under the previous Government; we put a moratorium on the process from day one in office—and the services they offered moved into the back of hardware stores. That had been happening for years: the public's complaint was that they were not consulted properly and that there was no proper system of appeal; the community could not decide together how best to replace the facilities.

The appeals procedure is, in the light of such issues, very important. It is one of a range of pragmatic proposals to ensure the future of not only rural post offices but the post office network as a whole. It is not enough to admire the history of this vital piece of our social fabric, or merely to read "Lark Rise to Candleford" by Flora Thompson, which I advise hon. Members to read if they do not understand how important post offices were in the 19th, never mind the 20th, century. We do not need to make those places into a rustic museum. We need to think about how the network can face the future, given the changes going on.

Our decision to make a substantial contribution to the capital cost of the Horizon counters automation project, which we have radically restructured and put back on track, represents a major investment in the future of the network. The Post Office already provides banking services for Alliance and Leicester, Girobank, Lloyds TSB and the Co-operative bank. Given that 60 per cent. of rural villages have a post office and only 5 per cent. have a bank, that is a tremendous opportunity. Already, as hon. Members may have read last week, the Post Office is installing 3,000 cash machines in post offices as part of the drive to reintroduce banking to rural areas. Currently there are only a couple of hundred.

What is being done—and this is joined-up government—will help to tackle social exclusion. The terminology bores us all sometimes, but that is an important aspect of the programme. Every study demonstrates conclusively that financial exclusion is a cause and an effect of social exclusion. We want to encourage and support people without access to a bank. I shall deal later with the points that were made about the C-word. We want banks to offer people proper facilities, because that is an important part of the attack on social exclusion.

We have set a time scale in which the transfer will not even begin until 2003, and will then continue until 2005. We believe that, with the developments in banking technology and the introduction of new, simple banking products, it will be possible to cater to individual circumstances and provide accounts suitable to individual needs. While the vast majority—80 to 85 per cent.—of benefit recipients already have access to bank accounts, we recognise that some may still be unwilling to use a bank account. We will not compel them to do so. For those people, we are considering what alternative, simple electronic money transmission system using ACT that could also be accessed at post offices might be commercially available. We recognise that benefit recipients want to withdraw every penny of their benefit at one time. That means, first, that the facility must ensure that a person who is entitled to £20.68 gets £20.68—it is the Government's commitment to pay them that benefit—and, secondly, that no charges should be made against that £20.68, otherwise that person would not receive his or her full benefit.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security made it clear—I invite hon. Members to read the report of the Select Committee on Trade and

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Industry—that we are not aiming to withdraw, reduce or dilute benefits that people draw. I emphasise again that there will be no change before 2003 to existing methods of benefit payments. All benefit recipients and state pensioners who want to will continue to be able to access their benefits in cash, across the counter at the post office, both before and after the changeover.

There is much more to do—in urban as well as rural areas. My points about those who are socially excluded are important in constituencies like mine. We can achieve much if we set our minds to planning the future of the network, which was unhealthily overdependent on the benefits system. There would have been a gradual move to ACT, and even a benefit payments card was not conceived as a solution that would last for ever.

The Post Office has had some marked success in introducing new work, such as bureaux de change and lottery work, but more can be done. The easy choice would be for us to allow the network to seep away in an uncontrolled fashion, to ignore the increasing shift to ACT, to refuse to tackle the deep-seated problems of financial and social exclusion, and to allow a failing PFI to continue. We could put the problem off until decline becomes crisis and crisis becomes collapse. These are difficult problems, but rural communities can be assured that we intend to resolve them, so that post offices will continue to meet the changing needs of the communities they serve as effectively in this century as they did in the last one.

Petrol Retailing

11 am

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Is the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) present for the next debate?

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am not familiar with the procedure in the new Chamber.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Perhaps I should make it quite clear to hon. Members that if they are not present when the Adjournment debate is called they lose their debate. On this occasion, as I was able to see the hon. Lady, although she was not in the Chamber, I am prepared to accept her presence.

Mrs. Spelman: I was waiting in the wings.

First, I should like to thank Madam Speaker, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for selecting this subject for an Adjournment debate. It is a particularly good subject for such a debate because many hon. Members of all parties will have a case in their constituency of the type that I am about to outline, so they can all participate. That is the spirit in which Adjournment debates should be conducted when they are at their best. The Minister will be pleased to hear that I do not intend to turn this into a party political debate because the debate should as far as possible rise above narrow party political arguments. He will be relieved to see that I have resisted the temptation to divert into the question of fuel taxes, which would rapidly become a party political debate. I intend to focus exclusively on the plight of the independent retailers in the petrol market and to urge the Government to act.

I shall begin by setting the scene a little. My attention was drawn to these problems by the unfortunate experience of my constituent, Mr. Parekh. He first came to my surgery in 1998 and I have tried all the avenues at my disposal as a Member of Parliament to help him, but without success. It was only as I pursued his case that it became clear that many other people were in the same position and that this would be a good subject for debate. Mr. Parekh's experiences need to be seen in the context of what has happened in the petrol retail market during the past three years. The oil companies responded to the competition from cut-price petrol sold by supermarkets with a price-cutting campaign. Esso's price watch campaign is just one well-known example of how the companies have fought back and, of course, the other oil companies responded in similar ways.

In the Office of Fair Trading report entitled "Competition in the supply of petrol in the UK", published in May 1998, it was estimated that, following supermarket competition, there were 5,000 fewer traditional filling stations. The OFT made a fairly superficial assessment of the causes of decline among independent retailers, blaming bad sites and a lack of competitiveness. But that seems to contrast with the interpretation put on events by the Federation of Small Businesses, quoted in the OFT report, which said:

"Competition between the oil companies and the hypermarkets had directly resulted in closure of independent solus-tie sites."

I just leave those two contrasting views about what really happened after this pretty vicious cut-price petrol war. I hope that my explanation of my constituent's case will make it clear where I think the truth lies.

I should like to focus the Minister's attention on the fact that, as I see it, the pain of the petrol price war was displaced by the oil suppliers on to the backs of the independent retailers by changes in the terms and conditions of their contracts, and the oil companies' failure to honour the undertakings given to the OFT to protect those who entered into agreements to retail petrol for them. Against that backdrop, world oil prices have stayed fairly stable since 1986, but the price of crude oil is a relatively small part of the pump price. More than 80 per cent. of the price of fuel at the pump is excise duty and VAT.

I do not wish to take a sidetrack to a debate on the consequences of the fuel escalator, because a lot of parliamentary time has been devoted to that, but I am sure that other hon. Members would like to draw attention to it. One aspect that is worth mentioning is the distortion in the retail market caused by Britain's high fuel tax regime. That is causing difficulties with cross-border smuggling, particularly between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I know that the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) will seek to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, to speak about that.

I wish to highlight those global market conditions and their interaction with our own domestic fuel tax arrangement to warn the Minister that, as crude prices have more than doubled in the last 12 months, oil companies may no longer be able to absorb the impact of fuel duty by cuts to profits. Consumers may feel that high tax regime more directly in future.

My constituent, Mr. Parekh, used to run a petrol station under what is known as a solus-tie agreement with Esso. Such agreements are common in the industry and mean that an independent retailer is exclusively tied to one wholesale supplier for a period. There have been concerns about agreements in the past, and as long ago as 1965 the Monopolies and Mergers Commission undertook a report on the supply of petrol to retailers in the UK which raised the issue of the degree of control exercised by the oil companies over the independent retailers. It concluded:

"Solus agreements seem to us to have some disadvantageous features as operated at present and to be potentially dangerous for the future unless certain safeguards are introduced."

Consequently, in 1966 the oil companies gave the then Board of Trade a set of undertakings, although they were subsequently amended in 1968, 1976 and 1984. Responsibility passed from the Board of Trade to the OFT in 1973.

This is where my constituent's story begins. He borrowed thousands of pounds from relatives and a bank to run an Esso petrol station. He signed a three-year contract that appeared to be regulated by the Department of Trade and Industry and the OFT. Within a short time of issuing the contract, the amount of rent demanded became quite unreasonable in relation to the turnover of the business and he was faced with breaching the agreement or becoming insolvent. He appealed to the OFT to arbitrate the dispute but was rebuffed by a standard reply from Mr. Bridgeman, the director general, stating that the OFT could not involve itself in individual disputes, despite the fact that numerous similar complaints had been lodged. Indeed, it was reported to the House that 57 such complaints had been lodged to the OFT in 1998 alone.

Just to backtrack for a second, in 1980 the then competition Minister, Mrs. Sally Oppenheim, wrote to one of her colleagues, who was concerned about the lack of legal protection for independent retailers, to say that the oil company was bound by those undertakings, as amended in 1976, and that there would be an arbitration scheme to settle disputes. In 1996 the oil company informed a Select Committee inquiry that an arbitration scheme was in place to resolve disputes with licensees but, faced with a real dispute, Mr. Bridgeman refused to arbitrate because he accepted the oil company's view that there was no dispute.

On 17 July 1996, the Select Committee on Trade and Industry recommended

"that a code of practice be drawn up through negotiations between the OFT and the petrol retail industry, covering the contractual relationships between wholesalers and retailers and including provisions for speedy and binding arbitration disputes. We further recommend that the code of practice be the subject of undertakings given by wholesalers and retailers to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry."

It added:

"We recommend that the petrol retailing industry is continuously monitored by the Director General of Fair Trading, using the indicators suggested by the MMC."

There is plenty of parliamentary evidence that the matter has been raised in various Select Committees on many occasions, but the problem remains. A large number of independent retailers cannot get disputes arbitrated adequately. Many feel let down by the Office of Fair Trading, which failed to ensure that undertakings given by the oil companies were honoured. The undertakings enshrined an automatic right to renew licences but, under the new licence agreement, that right was withdrawn from my constituent, Mr. Parekh.

The undertakings envisage that the right of renewal of a licence can be withdrawn only in special circumstances—where a petrol station is to be knocked down and rebuilt, where a site is to close, where a site is to be leased to a third party, or where an oil supplier chooses to run the site itself. Mr. Parekh was given the fourth reason for non-renewal but, in practice, the site is being run by an agent under licence. Where is the difference? The criterion for denying the right to renewal was not met by the oil company. Mr. Parekh is not alone in his experiences. There have been 1,200 forecourt closures each year since 1996, with rural closures creating virtual petrol deserts and high prices for people living in remote areas.

Another specific example was given to me by an hon. Member who cannot speak on the subject because he has a registered interest, but who was directly affected by exactly the same situation. Under a three-year agreement struck with an oil company in 1989, a very reasonable fee of £932 was to be paid by him to the company for his petrol filling station outlet. In 1992, the fee jumped dramatically to £21,350. With other charges thrown in on account of the sale of products on the filling station forecourt, the shop and so on, the charges came to £26,000 a year. On his £3 million turnover in 1992, the profit came down to just £13,000. That is a

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dismal return on anyone's investment. That independent retailer surrendered the lease in 1994 when he was told of a further increase in fees which would take effect from 1995. The filling station is now run by a manager for the oil company. That is one more example of the way in which independent retailers have suffered at the hands of oil companies.

What would I like the Government to do? The OFT reviewed the petrol undertakings, but thus far has failed to make significant changes. Following publication of the OFT's report "Competition in the supply of petrol in the UK" in May 1998, the then Under-Secretary ordered a review of petrol undertakings. In February last year, the present Under-Secretary answered a question on the Floor of the House, stating that he expected to receive advice from the Director General of Fair Trading "within the next month". Almost a year later there is still no announcement that a review has been undertaken. Will the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs tell us why the review is taking so long, when he expects it to be completed, whether it will be published and when? Perhaps the review will shed some light on the injustices suffered by independent retailers.

The OFT has been sadly lacking in its responsibility to monitor the outworking of those undertakings. The stock reply is that the matter is not the responsibility of the OFT; that it is concerned only about competition. Given the experiences of independent retailers, that is woefully inadequate. The OFT ruled that the terms of agreements offered by the major oil companies must be fair and reasonable. However, when the Total oil company advised the OFT that it intended to change the compensation given to retailers who went out of business, and announced that it would cut by nine tenths its payment to licensees whose licences would not be renewed, the OFT failed to respond.

The OFT dedicates only minimal resources to monitoring the forecourt industry and currently has less than one person on the job of acknowledging responsibility. I ask the Government to launch a fresh inquiry into why so many small and medium enterprises among petrol retailers have gone out of business since 1996. I want the inquiry to go beyond the trite assessment that there is a lack of competitiveness on the part of retailers and to examine whether there has been unfair practice by oil companies.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Would the hon. Lady care to look at another issue that affects my constituency—what I would call the area setting of prices? I do not know whether she intends to come to that. The bizarre situation in my area is that my most rural garage, which is run by Mr. Roger Budgen in Bisley, near Cheltenham, has until recently been able to sell the cheapest petrol, which is almost the reverse of what we might expect. I cannot get to the bottom of why that was possible for him, whereas in Stroud, where one would expect to buy cheaper petrol, retailers have to sell their petrol at a higher price. Has the hon. Lady had a similar problem in her area?

Mrs. Spelman: It strikes me more as an isolated case. My own experience from driving around the country over the Christmas and new year period was of a predictable pattern. In urban areas, especially those with a supermarket outlet, there is a remarkable conformity in prices. I cannot recall how many times I have driven past petrol stations displaying prices of 75.9p or, if one was lucky, 74.9p, in which case there was a queue. That is remarkable uniformity in pricing. In the more remote—especially upland—areas, such as the Cumbrian hills, small filling stations have to pay a significant premium because of the distribution costs. I am nonplussed by the hon. Gentleman's example. As his filling station is still in business, I suggest that all of us try to get to the bottom of that market success.

I am disquieted by that remarkable uniformity in prices. It certainly leaves me sceptical of the OFT's findings after it looked into competition in petrol sales. Such uniformity in pricing leads me to believe that competition is not as strong as the OFT would have us think.

I invite the Minister to think about a change of direction in policy in the United States of America and Australia, where, faced with similar problems, the Governments of those countries have ruled that oil companies cannot be both retailers and suppliers of petrol, other than having a token presence for the purpose of keeping a finger on the pulse of what is happening in the marketplace. Hon. Members will understand what I mean by a token presence if I say that that is just one filling station per American state, as state Governments have decided to separate the supply and retail of petrol. That really is a token presence. In Australia, the token presence is slightly higher, with six filling stations allowed per state. None the less, that amounts to a sparse representation of oil companies as supplier and retailer, and could be described as merely testing the temperature of the waters.

It is significant and interesting that those two Governments went down that route, perhaps for precisely the reason that I mentioned—that others are disquieted by the remarkable uniformity in prices. At global level, three, possibly four, major players in oil supply are emerging, along with several minor players. With so few major players and increasing market concentration, vertical integration—in which the major suppliers both supply and retail their product—is unhealthy for consumers in the longer term. That applies in other countries as well as in the UK.

This is no time for complacency. The demise of independent retailers is likely to hasten market concentration to the point where it becomes monopolistic. In some rural areas, there is already a virtual monopoly. The issues are complex, and I have resisted the temptation to highlight several smaller injustices in order to focus debate on the major injustices from which independent retailers have suffered.

In the light of the history of the parliamentary proceedings leading up to today, I hope that we do not lose sight of the fact that several individuals have suffered personally as a consequence of the failure to act appropriately to address the problem. I shall finish by citing one more example, which drives the point home.

After a lifetime in the teaching profession, a retired headmistress invested her savings in a local petrol filling station. She was encouraged by the household name of

the oil company to think that the investment offered a degree of security. Having been shown figures of the sort of business return that she could expect from her investment she was encouraged by the prospect of a decent return. However, the turnover had been inflated and she found that when her rent was taken into account, her business was simply not viable. She had to pull out, losing her investment. Her tenure was followed by that of yet another victim—victim is not the wrong word—who was attracted by inflated prospects, but five months later was no longer trading. I ask the Minister: how many more casualties will there be before the Government act?

11.23 am

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on raising this important matter in this morning's proceedings. She made many relevant points, but I should like to say a few words about Scotland because the cost of petrol and related issues remain within the purview of Westminster rather than the Scottish Parliament.

Petrol retailing has a significant effect, particularly in the highlands and islands of Scotland and in my constituency of Argyll and Bute. Petrol prices are prohibitively high in remote areas and on the islands. Last year, a petrol retailer on the island of Islay had to charge 85.9p per litre for four-star petrol, 79.9p per litre for unleaded petrol and 80p per litre for diesel. That compares with averages of 74p, 66p and 69p respectively.

The hon. Member for Meriden said that she did not wish to make party political points. I do not either on this occasion. However, it is important to understand the background to the debate on retailing. My constituent keeps going only because his retail business serves a particular part of the island. He and his wife keep going because they believe that they are providing a service—we spoke earlier about the importance of post office outlets, which provide another important service. However, because of a low turnover, my constituent told me that he did not qualify for the rebates that other petrol stations receive for large-volume sales. In addition, he provides approximately 60 per cent. of his petrol on credit because most of his customers are self-employed fishermen and farmers, so at any one time he could be owed as much as £18,000, which makes it difficult to survive.

We must remember that cars are a necessity, not a luxury, in remote rural areas. No matter how good public transport becomes, it will never be a substitute for cars in such areas. I hope, of course, that we will one day have a much better rural transport system in this country, but I cannot imagine buses ever going into little villages to pick up a few people.

The rise in the cost of diesel has increased overall costs, particularly in remote areas such as the highlands and islands of Scotland and Argyll and Bute. Many goods have to be hauled by road. We would like more goods to be transported by sea, but we cannot transfer goods to railways that do not exist: railways do not go to places such as Campbeltown, Dunoon and Lochgilphead. There have been constant hikes in petrol prices, and the escalator, without meaningful compensatory measures in rural areas, has been one of the most unpopular and deeply resented measures ever introduced by both Conservative and Labour Governments.

The Petrol Retail Association told me that 1,200 forecourt closures have taken place every year since 1996, and an average of 850 since 1969. At the end of 1997, Scotland had 1,299 petrol stations and by the end of the following year that number had shrunk to 1,200—a loss of nearly 100 primarily remote rural stations in vulnerable areas. It is lunacy for people to drive 40 miles to fill up their cars with petrol, consuming the fuel that they have just bought in getting home again, yet that is exactly what happens when so many retail forecourts close down.

We must know what is going on and why. The OFT has conducted investigations in the highlands and islands area, but its reports have not been enlightening. It claims that nothing is wrong, that companies do not operate cartels, and offers explanations such as higher delivery costs, higher fixed costs per litre, lack of favourable contract arrangements with major oil companies, the effects of VAT and limited competition. As the hon. Member for Meriden said, we need to know why the OFT has not completed its review of petrol undertakings, which it promised to do in June 1998.

Finally, what measures will the Government take to try to stop petrol retail stations closing in rural areas and particularly in the north and west of Scotland?

11.31 am

Mr. John Hume (Foyle): The crisis is at its worst in Northern Ireland, particularly the border counties. I can fill my car with fuel in my constituency, but, if I drive a mile down the road and cross the border, I can save 22p a litre or £1 a gallon. That is crazy and it will destroy the petrol station industry. The problem will not be solved by talking or by reports that were written months ago and about which nothing has been done. Action is required. The problem is serious for the towns and villages of Northern Ireland's border counties because the industry will be wiped out. The Secretary of State should meet representatives of petrol stations in Northern Ireland to produce an immediate plan to resolve the problem.

11.32 am

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on securing the debate because it is important to highlight the problems facing small petrol retailing firms.

I, too, support an inquiry into petrol retailing. Previous Governments and the Select Committee on Trade and Industry have investigated petrol retailing and produced reports, but somewhere along the way the issue has been swept under the carpet and recommendations have not been fulfilled. It should be brought out from under the carpet. There should be an inquiry and it should have teeth because many problems face many constituencies throughout the United Kingdom.

Every year there are 1,200 forecourt closures. The Government should support small and medium enterprises, but those closures have been allowed to happen since 1996. We must do something about the thousands of people who lose their jobs when those

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thousands of businesses close. We cannot continue to turn a blind eye. We must ensure that rural forecourts remain for the future because, like rural post offices, they are at the heart of the rural economy. We must ensure that something is done. Why have we allowed the creation of rural deserts? When a rural petrol station closes, it does not become something else overnight. Far from it. The site begins to wither and becomes overgrown, subject to tipping and, eventually, an eyesore.

The Government must focus on the future of small businesses in petrol retailing. They should get involved in the contract between small businesses and major oil companies. Oil companies were heavily squeezed by the previous Government and the present Government with the fuel escalator and they have not had an easy time, but they should play fairly and not squeeze small businesses. They do not want their profits to fall because they must consider their shareholders, but it is not acceptable to resolve the problem by closing small petrol stations. The petrol companies should embrace small petrol stations for their loyal service over many years.

There was an inquiry 35 years ago into agreements between oil companies and small petrol stations. Those agreements were thought to have a five-year future, but oil companies may give 30 days' notice of termination. Petrol forecourts often have a shop to make a little more money, but the products in the shop must be bought through the oil companies and the prices are decided by the oil companies. That is anti-competitive. Previously, if money was not being made from petrol, it could be made from the shop, but the oil companies recognised another opportunity to squeeze money out of petrol retailers.

Why did the European Commission allow the block exemption to be renewed? It exempts oil company agreements from examination until a single company exceeds 30 per cent. of the national share. But an oil company may have a regional monopoly. The country may have been nicely carved up between the oil companies, but it is even nicer for an oil company if it has a monopoly in one region because it can then dictate terms, prices and conditions throughout that region. That is what is happening. There is no point in having a national agreement if there are regional monopolies.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My hon. Friend will be aware of the matter raised by the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) who referred to the earlier Select Committee report, which recommended that a code of practice be drawn up with the Office of Fair Trading through negotiation with retailers and wholesalers so that grievances between retailers and wholesalers could be considered. Does he believe that such a mechanism between retailers and suppliers would be advantageous to the retailers?

Mr. Hoyle: Of course. I respect that view, which should be encouraged. My hon. Friend was a member of Select Committee that has investigated fuel retailing. I hope that we shall have a response from the Government on that today.

There are only three national marketers of motor fuel and they have a combined market share of 85 per cent. We begin to see that the real muscle is in those big three companies. Petrol retailers in rural areas provide a service, which generation after generation may have provided, but such family connections have had to end because of the muscle power of major oil companies. I am lucky in having good rural petrol stations in my constituency of Chorley. They provide a loyal service, but I wonder how long that can continue. The petrol station in Ulnes Walton is lucky because it became wine retailer of the year. It is successful and provides a great service not only in petrol but in fine, quality wines. But not every petrol retailer has the ability to do that and not every oil company will allow that. That petrol station is a huge success, but it cannot be replicated up and down the country.

My local petrol station, Walkdens in Aglington—I use it regularly and my family has had an account there for 30 years—has had BP, ICI, Fina and now Shell petrol. Each time the oil company changes, the agreement changes. I do not want to lose that local filling station. I want it to continue because it provides a good service, but I am worried that it will be squeezed by the oil companies.

Our friends in Northern Ireland have experienced the squeeze and petrol filling stations have been closing daily. The problem is not only that small businesses are closing in Northern Ireland—a problem that is not being addressed—but that fuel smuggling represents a cost to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. People in Northern Ireland can make good money out of smuggling petrol. Not only does that cost the Exchequer millions of pounds, but it means a loss of employment and the closure of small businesses. Unfortunately, it is a sad fact that petrol smuggling is seen as an alternative. Petrol smuggling is happening in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and now in England as well. It will force even more small retailers out of the market as people look for alternative sources of fuel.

11.41 am

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): One of my constituents, Mr. Peter Avery, who runs the Lanehouse Rocks road Esso garage and is also a motor retailer, alerted me to the fact that he had written to me at the beginning of 1999 and that I had made representations on his behalf to the Government. The Government told us not to worry because the Office of Fair Trading was looking at petrol retailing. I had to admit that I had lost sight of the fact that the OFT had done nothing about the issue. I ask the Government to explain their original policies.

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): It simply is not true that the OFT has done nothing. It has been attempting, as I hope it always will, to carry out an exhaustive investigation of the issue. The OFT has told me that it is due to report to us at the end of February or the beginning of March. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall make that information available to the House.

Mr. Bruce: I am most grateful to the Minister for that comment. I spoke to Mr. Avery on the telephone yesterday. He asked, "Is the debate worth while?" I replied, "Funnily enough, Governments tend to forget that they have made commitments." I predicted that the Minister would jump to his feet and say, "Ah,

but we are about to get the report and take action." I do not accuse the Minister of making those comments in bad faith, but I am glad that this welcome debate, initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman), is having an effect.

Normally, when business men go into business and sign leases with landlords, they are covered by the Landlord and Tenant Acts and their rent cannot be jumped up immediately. They normally know that, as a retailer, they can buy from anyone. If they sell baked beans, they can buy many varieties or only one. They take the decisions. However, I understand that the Landlord and Tenant Acts do not apply to petrol retailing contracts.

In the past, the Government said that it would be difficult for petrol retailers to be covered by those Acts because they cannot easily change the petrol in their tanks, or the signs outside their stations. The fact that they were selling on a branded basis would make any change difficult. So the petrol companies agreed that they would give certain undertakings about how they would deal with their retailers. I understand that those undertakings have simply not been kept. Therefore, a mechanism is needed to protect those business people, like all other businesses, from unfair practices.

I served on the Committee that considered the Competition Act 1998, which is quite comprehensive. The Opposition spent time asking Ministers what they would use the Act for, but answer came there none. They would not give a single example of what they intended to do with that Act. It has been on the statute book for some time, so people are entitled to ask the Government, who came to power with many consumer and business-friendly policies, to do something about competition.

On Monday, travelling on the motorway, I passed a car transporter, which, like the Government, seemed in perfect order. The problem was that it was full of burnt-out cars. That is a metaphor for the Labour Government. They still look as though they know where they are going and as though they have wheels on their vehicle, but they are carrying burnt-out policies. If the Government believe that they will make a difference and that things can only get better, surely they should do something for petrol retailers.

11.47 am

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) and thank her for bringing this matter before Parliament. She referred to Northern Ireland, as have other hon. Members. I should like to echo the comments of the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), who suggested that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should take urgent action to meet petrol retailers in the Province to discuss the serious crisis that has affected petrol retailers in that part of the United Kingdom.

I want to give an idea of the impact that fuel smuggling and the differentials in fuel prices between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are having on the petrol retail industry in Northern Ireland. Just before Christmas, petrol prices in the United Kingdom were the highest in the European Union, whereas in the Republic of Ireland they were the fourth lowest. In the United Kingdom, petrol cost 73.37p a litre, whereas in the Republic of Ireland it was 51.13p a litre. That is a significant difference. The cost of a litre of diesel in the United Kingdom was 75.27p, but in the Republic of Ireland it was 46.68p.

Those fuel differentials are causing significant problems for petrol retailers in Northern Ireland. First, they are having an impact on their customers. Many people travel across the border to purchase fuel. That means that business for retailers in Northern Ireland has slumped. For example, estimates suggest that petrol retailers in the border area have lost between 25 and 50 per cent. of their trade as a result of the fuel differentials. The Petrol Retailers Association estimates that about 50 petrol stations have closed in the border area. That is a significant number of petrol stations in a small area such as Northern Ireland, but it is even more significant given that the estimate is for the border region only.

The other cause of difficulty for petrol retailers in Northern Ireland is fuel smuggling. The differential in prices has unfortunately meant that smuggling has increased substantially. Fuel smuggling has several impacts. It has an impact on petrol retailers, as I have already mentioned. It also has an impact on the Government, who lose revenue. It has been estimated that in the past 12 months in Northern Ireland the loss of revenue due to smuggling amounts to more than £100 million—a substantial sum in terms of public expenditure in Northern Ireland. We, like other parts of the United Kingdom, are facing a crisis in the availability of hospital beds. How many beds could be provided in Northern Ireland with that £100 million?

What is the Government's response? Last year the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs issued an excellent report on the impact of cross-border road fuel price differentials, which I commend to all hon. Members. During cross-examination on the Government's response to the report, the Economic Secretary said:

> "£100 million in the context of £21 billion overall from fuel duties as a whole is really a very . . . small part of the overall picture."

But in respect of Northern Ireland, it is a big part of the picture, and the Government should not take that attitude towards the loss of even £100 million in revenue. They must act, not only to help petrol retailers in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, but to stop that loss to the Exchequer.

The hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle) said correctly that the problem of fuel smuggling was no longer unique to Northern Ireland but was spreading to other parts of the United Kingdom. There are reports of illegal fuel being offered for sale in Scotland and Wales. Indeed, even in London there have been reports of tanker loads of illegal fuel arriving and cut-price deals being offered to retailers. The cancer of fuel smuggling is spreading. It is not just a Northern Ireland issue which the Government can sweep under the carpet; it needs to be addressed on a UK-wide basis.

Petrol retailers in Northern Ireland continue to suffer from both fuel differentials and the smuggling of illegal fuel from the Republic of Ireland. I urge the Government to reconsider the recommendations of the

[Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson]

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee because their response to its report was inadequate. They need to do more, because the issue does not impact only on petrol retailers. In its report, the Committee said:

"There is no doubt that the differential in fuel prices across the land boundary in the island of Ireland is a difficult issue and one that has serious consequences for fuel suppliers and road hauliers. It is also a wider problem in that, besides distorting trading patterns, it appears to have become a means of funding paramilitaries and racketeers. It is therefore damaging the social fabric of Northern Ireland."

As we seek to make progress in Northern Ireland, we need to remove the opportunities for paramilitary organisations to continue with their illegal activities—smuggling illegal fuel is a major such opportunity. That is another reason why Government agencies need to co-ordinate their approach to the issue.

There is also the impact on the road haulage industry in Northern Ireland. Because we are part of an island, we are especially dependent on our road haulage industry, particularly for our export trade. At the moment, the Northern Ireland road haulage industry is suffering severely from the high fuel costs in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that fuel and excise duties account for between 25 and 40 per cent. of the operating costs of haulage operations. That is a huge amount. Their competitiveness is undermined if fuel costs are significantly higher in Northern Ireland than in the neighbouring state of the Republic of Ireland. I therefore agree with the hon. Member for Meriden that the problem in Northern Ireland is acute and spreading to other parts of the UK. It must be addressed by the Government, whose approach to date has been inadequate. More resources need to be made available to Customs and Excise to combat fuel smuggling. Something must also be done to address the issue of fuel price differentials.

I conclude by noting that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee stated:

"We recommend that the Government investigates further the experience of other EU Member States in dealing with the problems of price and duty differentials across national boundaries in relation to road fuels."

The Government could do more. I acknowledge that the scheme that was operating in Holland has run into difficulties with the EU, but that does not mean that a solution to the problems of illegal fuel smuggling and fuel price differentials between member states cannot be found. As we operate in a single market, perhaps the solution could be EU-wide. Petrol retailers, the road haulage industry and the community in Northern Ireland would welcome a much more proactive approach by the Government to these important issues.

11.55 am

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) for initiating this debate, which we welcome, particulary in respect of Northern Ireland.

I endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) said. I represent the border constituency of West Tyrone, where six major petrol stations have already closed and others are on the brink of closing because of the differential between petrol prices in the Republic of Ireland and those in the United Kingdom. Even miles away from the border, some large petrol stations have seen a reduction of up to 50 per cent. in sales.

Figures for consumption in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland show that, of total petrol sales for the whole of Ireland in 1994, 35.9 per cent. were conducted in Northern Ireland. That figure has now decreased to 24.2 per cent. Likewise, in 1995 Northern Ireland had 27.7 per cent. of total diesel sales, but it now has 16.1 per cent. That illustrates the change in the balance of sales between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. As my hon. Friend said, that means that the Exchequer is losing up to £100 million per year.

There is a lot of smuggling. As one travels in Northern Ireland, one can see adverts for diesel at 56p per litre and an arrow pointing to where to go to get it. I rang the police and asked why they could not follow the arrow and do something about the problem, but they said that it was a matter for Customs and Excise. When I asked Customs and Excise to go along and find out how diesel was being sold at that price, it said, "It wouldn't be worth our while investigating such a small issue; we work in a different way in a larger field." When asked why they are not succeeding, they say that they do not have the personnel to do the job. We need more people on the ground to trace the illegal importers and we need co-operation and co-ordination between the police, Customs and Excise and other bodies to try to defeat the smugglers. I appeal to the Government to give this issue serious consideration and to co-ordinate the various agencies that are trying to stop smuggling. We must also examine more seriously the possibility of greater parity between fuel prices in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

12 noon

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on introducing the debate and on her choice of subject. She made her case in a firm, measured way, thus helping to set the scene for ensuing speeches.

There has been a high degree of unanimity between speakers from different parties, which I intend to continue. I hope that that will be matched by the Minister's comments at the end of our debate. Clearly, Northern Ireland has a special problem, which hon. Members representing it have expressed more eloquently and in greater detail than I could. The hon. Member for West Tyrone (Mr. Thompson) said that sales are bleeding across the border. The Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland must give that matter serious consideration.

As a representative of the Liberal Democratics and as a local Member of Parliament contacted by independent retailers in one's constitutency I am worried. Like other hon. Members, in recent years I have witnessed independent petrol stations closing with monotonous regularity. There has been an horrific contraction of the independent sector. According to the *Evening Standard*, the number of filling stations has fallen from 40,000 to only 13,000 in the past 30 years. That is a drop of almost 70 per cent. Of the surviving stations, 10 per cent. closed last year. If that rate of decline were attributed to an animal, it would be regarded as an endangered species

facing extinction. Contraction of the independent sector is not in the retailers' or public's interest, as it will lead to a concentration of power in a few oil companies, which will be detrimental to consumers and those employed in the industry.

Mr. Drew: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in a slightly different context, the planning process has a part to play? Obviously, the provision of petrol retailing has been key to out-of-town shopping, having a dramatic impact on retailers in the immediate vicinity and sometimes those up to 30 miles away. People drive to such outlets to do their shopping and buy petrol at the same time, which is blatantly unfair to independent retailers.

Mr. Baker: I agree, and I hope that the Minister will take account of the matter and refer it to his colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

The hon. Member for Meriden avoided using the word "cartel", speaking instead about passive collusion, which is an interesting phrase. However, perhaps "cartel" is not too strong, as there is evidence that oil companies are working together—passively, if not actively—to drive independent businesses out of petrol retailing. I am not confident that the Department of Trade and Industry or the Office of Fair Trading understands that. I hope that the Minister will persuade me that they do.

Dr. Howells: If the hon. Gentleman has evidence of oil companies acting as cartels, he should give it to the Chamber.

Mr. Baker: I shall give the Minister evidence from Select Committee reports and representations from my constituents.

The Select Committee report already referred to shows that 50 per cent. of four-star petrol sold between April and August 1996 was sold at or below cost. In 1997, petrol price competition was so fierce that British Petroleum is alleged to have lost £130 million selling petrol to the public. That may be compared with predatory pricing arrangements in the newspaper market. *The Times*, for example, has been sold for some time at an artificially low price which, many believe, will drive *The Independent* and other newspapers out of the market. Those who are strong in the market can take losses over a period in order to drive those who cannot out of the market.

The price at which petrol is sold involves a curious arrangement. We have been told that it is more costly to deliver petrol to upland parts of Cumbria than other areas. No doubt that is true. In Asda's opinion, the additional cost of delivering petrol to rural areas is a maximum of 1.5p a litre. However, the difference in petrol prices is rather more than that. My hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie) referred to the position in Scotland. According to *The Scotsman*, the BP filling station at the entrance of the Grangemouth refinery charges more for petrol than the BP station in Edinburgh. Arrangements for petrol retailing are not as clean as the oil companies would have us believe.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I shall give some anecdotal evidence. For 13 years, I have written regularly to petrol companies, asking why petrol prices in South Dorset are 3p a litre more than they are elsewhere. In the past three months, delivery problems have suddenly disappeared, and petrol is now sold at the standard price of 74.9p a litre throughout almost the whole of my constituency. Somehow, as if by magic, petrol companies reached a common position. Naturally, there was no collusion.

Mr. Baker: The hon. Gentleman may be able to claim credit for that in party literature at the next election.

Mr. Bruce: I shall.

Mr. Baker: The hon. Member for Meriden spoke about vertical integration, which is another worrying issue. Again, a comparison may be drawn with other parts of industry. The previous Government rightly took action on the retail and supply of beer. They were worried that those who were producing beer were distorting the retail market. Action was taken to prevent beer suppliers from having too many public house outlets. No such action has been taken to deal with the problem of vertical integration in petrol retailing.

Mr. Hoyle: Is the hon. Gentleman not worried that going down that route would lead to umpteen pub closures throughout the country? The worst thing to happen to pub landlords was changing the rules. We should not do the same to petrol retailers.

Mr. Baker: I am not sure that I agree with that. However, we must take action to change the balance of power between the independent sector and major oil companies supplying petrol and operating filling stations. That balance is currently heavily weighted in the oil companies' favour. If separating supply and retail is not the solution—even though that is perfectly sensible—we must find an alternative. We cannot carry on as we are because if we do there will be no independent sector when the House debates the matter in 10 years' time.

Oil companies have been accused of putting pressure on small retailers to tie them into contracts compelling them to buy a large amount of petrol at predetermined prices. An OFT review is, quite properly, taking place. Like other hon. Members, I am worried that the OFT is taking an inordinate period to report. I hope that that means that it is making a detailed examination of petrol retailing, which would help it to reach the conclusion that current arrangements must be changed to give more weight to the independent sector and less to oil companies. However, in the meantime, petrol stations are closing throughout Britain: they cannot all survive for months on end until the report is published.

Of petrol sold in Britain, 90 per cent. is suppled by four companies—Shell, Esso, BP and Texaco. Big petrol retailers—oil companies and supermarkets—account for 85 per cent. of sales. However, independent retailers sometimes act as a brake on prices—their own, although their margins are smaller, and those of oil companies and supermarkets. I am therefore pleased that there are independent retailers close to Lewes and elsewhere in my constituency. Indeed, I have noticed prices creeping up when independent retailers close down. Keeping independent retailers in business is important in offering choice to customers buying fuel.

[Mr. Baker]

Those who have the opportunity to use muscle in a market are not unlikely to do so. That is how capitalism works. Part of Government's role is to implement controls and restraints to ensure that a fair market operates and prevent exploitation. I shall relate one anecdote from my constituency, which demonstrates how supermarkets can operate. It concerns an independent petrol retailer in my constituency, at Denton corner, Newhaven, who was struggling to survive, not least because of an unhelpful road realignment by the county council.

Shortly afterwards, opposite that retailer, a Sainsbury's supermarket opened. It offered artifically cheap fuel and put up a huge banner advertising that fact within the view of those who bought petrol from the independent petrol station. The independent retailer then moved to a 24-hour operation to try to survive, and the supermarket followed suit. The independent petrol retailer closed down, and the supermarket withdrew its 24-hour operation within seven days and hiked up the price of its petrol. Who benefits from that, apart from the supermarket and perhaps the oil company? Such predatory behaviour gives supermarkets a bad name.

What are the remedies? First, the Government should state that they value the role of the independent sector and the diversity that it provides. They should also recognise that diversity in the petrol retailing industry is an issue for consumers. If that is the Government's position—I have no reason to think otherwise—they should understand the present arrangements operating in this country. Independent retailers in my constituency have told me that, under those arrangements, they pay more per litre for their petrol than the supermarkets and the petrol-supplying oil companies. They are being overcharged in comparison with the big boys.

The Minister must recognise that the current situation is unsustainable. The Office of Fair Trading report must be delivered as soon as possible, and the Government must make a commitment to act on that report if, as I assume it will, it finds that the market is not structured fairly.

Secondly, the Government should implement the Select Committee recommendation to which the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) referred. A code of practice should be drawn up, through negotiation between the Office of Fair Trading and the petrol retail industry, which would cover the contractual relationships between wholesalers and retailers. It would include provisions for speeding and the binding arbitration of disputes. The code of practice would be the subject of undertakings given by the wholesalers and retailers to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. That was an absolutely sensible recommendation, which should be given due weight now.

Lastly, I refer the Minister to early-day motion 18 on independent petrol forecourt operators, which was tabled on 17 November by the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle). It has now been signed by more than 100 Members. This is not a party political matter—all parties have concerns about the issue—and I hope that the Government will act to remedy the damage that is being done to the independent retail sector.

12.13 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs. Spelman) on securing this debate. It has been a good debate, which the Government needed to hear, and I am glad that I have been present for it. The Whip was surprised when I walked in to speak on behalf of the Government in this debate—a colleague of mine, who is not of the same sex, had been expected to reply. However, I can assure hon. Members that I am very interested in the subject.

I assure the hon. Member for Meriden that the Government appreciate that many small businesses find it difficult to compete in modern markets, especially against larger companies. However, would more and tighter regulation be the best and most appropriate means of action? I ask that question because, whenever I speak on the Floor of the House, Conservative Members usually ask me about deregulating the economy, not increasing regulation. I shall try to explain why I am in favour not of adding to regulation but of trying other means to resolve the situation.

It has been argued that oil companies have too much control over petrol retailers. However, the key question is whether the consumer is benefiting. It is not the Government's role to second-guess markets or to try to determine who should and should not survive. I am a firm believer in competition. It brings the greatest benefits to consumers, who are at the heart of my brief.

The Office of Fair Trading works to ensure that, through strong competition in the petrol market, the consumer gets a good deal in the supply of road fuels. In 1998, the OFT's report on the supply of petrol found that competition was strong and that consumers were benefiting. Competitiveness has increased in recent years, especially since 1994, when price competition between supermarkets and the oil majors started to become more vigorous. That is when these problems began to manifest themselves. In real terms, petrol pump prices, net of VAT and duty, have fallen by a quarter since January 1990. The director general concluded that he did not need to intervene to improve the already vigorous competition in the market.

The report recognises that independent petrol retailers have been badly affected by competition between the oil companies and supermarkets. However, the director general concluded that overall competition was strong and working to the benefit of consumers. The director general must consider competition in the market as a whole; that is his job.

Mr. Baker: Does the director general think that, if the independent sector were removed altogether, competition would still act in the interests of the consumer and prices would still be decreasing? Alternatively, does he think, as I do, that that would provide an opportunity for a smaller number of suppliers to increase prices?

Dr. Howells: I am sure that the Director General of Fair Trading shares my view that the more independent retailers we have as real competitors to the big companies, the better. The barriers to entry must be as low as possible. However, if we have an independent competition regulator—the Director General of Fair

Trading—we must pay attention to what he tells us. Allowing short-term political considerations to distort markets is ultimately to the detriment of consumers.

More recently, an OFT investigation after the 1999 Budget showed that increases in pump prices were accounted for—as certain hon. Members have said—by tax increases and sharp rises in the price of crude oil. This morning, I looked at the quoted crude oil price. It has increased by a dollar in a week. It is now more than $24 a barrel, whereas a year ago it was $11 a barrel. We must take that into account.

Recent figures show that increases in retail prices do not reflect the full increase in the crude oil price. Margins in the industry have become much tighter in recent years. That indicates weak competition or anti-competitive behaviour, but the opposite. It can be seen as a reaction to the increased competition provided by the entry of major supermarkets into petrol retailing. It is a competitive market with keen prices, which ultimately benefits consumers. That is a fact of life, and oil companies and their retailers have little choice but to deal with it.

This morning, we have been considering vertical agreements. The Government believe that vertical agreements are unlikely to be anti-competitive unless there is horizontal market power. In his thoughtful and extremely interesting contribution, the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) alleged that cartels were working, which would imply horizontal collusion between companies. If he has the evidence to prove that—I did not hear it in his contribution—I would be glad to hear it. It is a serious allegation, and a serious criticism of the veracity of the reports by the Director General of Fair Trading.

We should remember that those undertakings have been in place since 1966. Mr. John Bridgeman and his predecessors are neither blind nor stupid. They would not fail to notice if major oil companies were operating a cartel, and I will not accept that they are so doing until I see evidence of it. Nor can I accept the characterisation of vertical controls as anti-competitive. No major European Union economy regards them as anti-competitive. Indeed, there are exemptions for vertical relationships between companies and between sectors throughout the EU.

Retailers have complained repeatedly about contractual abuse on the part of suppliers. A contractual issue is usually a matter for the parties concerned and, in the absence of serious competition concerns, does not constitute a competition issue. That is defined by the way in which this country's competition law works and has worked under previous Administrations since the second world war.

As I have said, competition in the petrol market is strong and is benefiting consumers. Over the years, the OFT has investigated a number of complaints about agreements between petrol retailers and suppliers. So far, it has concluded that such complaints were contractual matters that did not raise competition concerns. I appreciate that complainants may not agree with the OFT's verdict, but if it finds no evidence of anti-competitive behaviour that is detrimental to consumers, the OFT has no grounds for taking action under competition legislation. In that respect, this morning's debate has proved useful, because it may have highlighted an area that needs to be examined.

Mrs. Spelman: The Minister is right to emphasise the competition issue. He says that the Government cannot intervene in what is a contractual matter between an independent retailer and an oil supplier, but the truth is that there is limited competition for the supply of the raw material to the retailer. Such disputes involve small units that can hardly afford to go to the courts, and powerful players with huge resources at their disposal.

Dr. Howells: That is true, and I shall try to answer the hon. Lady's point. I appreciate the difficulties that small traders experience in such circumstances.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I pointed out in my speech that I wrote to the Government in the early part of last year about contractual issues that arose between a petrol company and a retailer in my constituency and was told not to worry because the matter had been referred to the OFT. If that is the wrong body to which to refer contractual issues, what will the Minister do about such problems?

Dr. Howells: The OFT is precisely the right place to refer such issues because it is the main competition regulator and the body with which such issues must ultimately be discussed on Parliament's behalf. The hon. Gentleman told us that he was a member of the Competition Bill Committee. If he was not asleep during its proceedings, he will know that the Act will not come into effect until March 2000, because the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and others told us that there must be a period of grace in which preparations can be made for the onslaught of the new legislative regime. To the shame of previous Administrations, when the Competition Act comes into effect in March 2000, it will be the first time that the competition regulator will have the teeth with which to attack market abuses.

The Director General of Fair Trading has tried to foster constructive discussion in the industry on the handling of disputes between wholesalers and retailers. In October 1997, he hosted a meeting between representatives of petrol retailers, supermarkets and petrol wholesalers, to assess the scope for improving relations between retailers and wholesalers. That meeting fulfilled a commitment made to the Select Committee on Trade and Industry in December 1996, but it was not a success. As the hon. Member for Lewes properly noted, those retailers and wholesalers who were present seemed unwilling to agree, even in principle, to any acceptable code of practice. Nor were they prepared to take other action that might improve relations between the two sides. That is extremely regrettable. I make an undertaking to the Chamber today that, if the two sides wish to meet again to discuss seriously the possibility of signing up to a code of practice and are prepared to compromise where necessary, my Department will do everything possible to broker such a meeting.

Clearly, tensions between retailers and their suppliers are always likely to arise. Each side will always strive to gain more concessions than the other is prepared to make. That is particularly true of an industry in which

[Dr. Howells]

margins are tight and competition is strong at all levels. It is not always possible quickly to induce a more constructive approach. We must remember that these undertakings have been in place since 1966. Since the mid-1970s, when price watch was introduced and supermarkets began to compete strongly, people have complained about the undertakings. Perhaps that was a coincidence, or perhaps the complaint is that competition has intensified and margins have reduced.

In conclusion, I shall address the extremely important issue of fuel in Northern Ireland, which is of great concern to those hon. Members who have spoken so eloquently on it. Treasury Ministers and Customs and Excise are aware of the illegal importation of fuel for resale into Northern Ireland, and recognise the associated problems. Since the beginning of 1998, Customs and Excise has seized 93 vehicles and 1.27 million litres of fuel, and has secured admissions of the smuggling of a further 30 million litres. Fifty-three people have been arrested, of whom 41 have been charged. Of those cases that have been completed, seven have led to prosecution and four to custodial sentences. I shall point out to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that hon. Members who have spoken today have asked that he meet representatives of petrol retailers in Northern Ireland. I undertake that, if he is unable to do so, I will meet those representatives. I shall travel to Northern Ireland soon to discuss carbon monoxide poisoning, and could meet them then.

Many hon. Members have spoken, but insufficient time prevents me from dealing with all the issues that have been raised. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) made an important point when he said that there must be a way in which to combat the problem of significant price differentials across frontiers, and I agree that it should be regarded as a European Union-wide issue. Reference was made to a problem at the Dutch-German border, where the Dutch were subsidising petrol stations within 20 km of the border. They were taken to court by the European Commission on the grounds that such subsidies constituted unfair state aid. These are difficult problems, but I hope that we can discuss them with representatives of petrol retailers in Northern Ireland.

I sympathise with the hon. Member for Meriden, who put her case in an articulate and, as was noted, measured way. I am sure that we all share her concern for small petrol retailers. The same problem has arisen in my own constituency. However, we must look at the big picture—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. Time is up.

PC Gordon Warren

12.30 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate.

The House is no stranger to the case of ex-PC Gordon Warren, which was debated here on 15 April 1994. It was raised by my predecessor, Nigel Forman, and reported in *Hansard* at column 613. In his speech, Mr. Forman said that it was his longest-running constituency case. For Mr. Warren's sake, I do not intend it to become mine as well. I would like to take this opportunity to commend Nigel Forman for his efforts in trying to secure a satisfactory outcome in for the case.

Ministers are no strangers, either, to the case of ex-PC Gordon Warren. I held meetings with two Ministers when they were at the Home Office: the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). The Metropolitan police are also familiar with the case. I held meetings with Sir Paul Condon as recently as last week, and with John Stevens, and also with Michael Bennett and Glen Smyth of the Police Federation. I am sure that the Minister present today is also familiar with the case.

However, for the benefit of hon. Members, it is worth running through some of the key events of this sad saga. It started in April 1982 when Mr. Warren, a serving police officer, was asked by a senior officer to attend a party at Sutton police station while on duty. He of course refused and it is this event that Mr. Warren believes triggered the whole sorry affair. Another key event took place in January 1985 when a medical certificate was issued by Dr. Bott, a medical officer with the Met, certifying Mr. Warren as medically unfit. He was suffering from paranoia, it would seem. This was overturned by the medical referees to the Home Office, but almost a year later another medical certificate was issued by the same doctor.

In 1988, Mr. Warren won damages for wrongful dismissal, and further damages in the Court of Appeal in 1989. In February 1994, an ex gratia payment of £85,000 was offered by the Met, and in April 1994, as I have already mentioned, there was an Adjournment debate in the House on the subject. In 1995, Gordon Warren received an apology from Sir Paul Condon. [*Interruption.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. There appear to be members of the public in the Chamber. Would they please withdraw from the Floor of the Chamber as quickly as possible? They should not have been admitted through the Members' entrance.

Mr. Brake: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In 1995, Sir Paul Condon wrote to Mr. Warren to issue an apology. Thirteen years after this sorry affair started he received a written apology, in which Sir Paul stated that there were absolutely no grounds for Mr. Warren's dismissal, and no question of mental instability or paranoia.

I could also refer to meetings that I have held over the past couple of years with Ministers and with the Met. It is an extensive case history, and I have some of the

correspondence here today. I know that Mr. Warren has a much more extensive file. Although there is an extensive case history, there are still, regrettably, certain outstanding issues.

I shall start by mentioning something that is no longer required, which is the apology to which I have already referred. That is the one issue on which progress has been made in the six years since this case was last raised in an Adjournment debate. The apology was issued, and in the letter Sir Paul Condon said:

"you are entitled to a full apology, which I unreservedly give and regret the distress caused to you."

Mr. Warren has accepted that apology.

I turn now to the first obstacle in the case, which I do not believe is insurmountable. It concerns the certificate of conduct stating when Mr. Warren left the police force. He has a clutch of certificates of conduct—I believe that there are seven in total—which contain six or seven different dates for when he was supposed to have left the force. The issue can be resolved, and a mutually acceptable leaving date can be found by the Met and Mr. Warren.

The second sticking point is much more challenging. It concerns the reluctance of the Metropolitan police to record the allegation of perjury made by Mr. Warren against Dr. Bott. The relevant section of the police training manual is unequivocal. It states that

"whenever an allegation is made that a crime has been committed, an entry must be made in the crime complaint form, even if the police officer concerned doubts the authenticity of the complainant's story."

One cannot misinterpret the police training manual. Yet, according to the House of Commons Library, the practice differs significantly between police forces, with some requiring corroborating evidence that an offence has been committed before an allegation of a crime of any nature is recorded.

I hope that the Minister can inform me—in writing at a later date, if necessary—whether the police are required, as the police training manual clearly states, to record every allegation of crime, or whether they can exercise a degree of flexibility in this respect, as they have informed me. Can the Minister cite any precedents? Has the issue been tested in court? I would like an answer on that point in the near future, if not now, because the allegation of perjury and its recording are central to the case.

The Metropolitan police will say that the matter has been investigated, but no investigating officer was appointed and Mr. Warren was never asked to produce in evidence his taped conversations with Dr. Bott, against whom he made the allegation of perjury. Mr. Warren is adamant that those tapes would show that Dr. Bott had subsequently knowingly distorted the medical facts, which would constitute perjury. If there has been an investigation by the Met into the allegation, it would appear to have been very one-sided. Is it too much to expect that Mr. Warren's allegation against Dr. Bott should be recorded? He is not even asking for it to be investigated. He simply wants the matter recorded.

The next impasse relates to the compensation figure. In fairness, I should point out that this matter has been before the Court of Appeal, which did not award aggravated or exemplary damages. However, the Court of Appeal might have been more generous to Mr. Warren if it had not been misinformed about the pension that he was receiving. Their Lordships believed that it was a higher rate disability pension, rather than the ordinary pension that he was in fact receiving.

Regardless of what has happened in the High Court and the Court of Appeal, the Met has offered an ex gratia payment of £85,000. That is the offer on the table. There has also been at least one letter suggesting a higher figure of £95,000, although that offer has subsequently been withdrawn. Mr. Warren and I do not find that acceptable. He has not worked for the past 15 years, or thereabouts, yet he could have expected to work for perhaps a further 13 years in the Met, were it not for the apparent vendetta against him. The offer of £85,000 is insufficient, especially when one takes into account the legal costs that he has incurred, which amount to more than £30,000.

If the Metropolitan police and the Home Office are confident that the compensation on offer is more than adequate, why will they not allow the financial settlement to be determined by an independent arbitrator? Mr. Warren is willing to allow such an independent assessment to take place and to be bound by its outcome. He is also willing to sign a document of full and final settlement promising to take no further action. However, he would of course require a similar commitment to the outcome of that review from the Met and the Home Office. The risk must be shared by all the parties involved.

Can the Minister confirm whether, if the Met authorises such an assessment and agrees to be bound by its recommendations, the Home Office will allow it to proceed? What value would the Home Office place on such recommendations if the arbitrator recommended that Mr. Warren should receive more substantial compensation?

The case smacks of the bad old days of the Met. It features attempts by less principled colleagues to throw a straight policeman out of the force. Dr. Bott, the medical officer working for the Met, produced a medical certificate stating that Mr. Warren was suffering from a personality disorder with paranoid tendencies, which was later found in the courts to be unlawful. It contained offers of unjustified—in Mr. Warren's view—medical pensions designed to get him to leave the force. Perhaps that was because his superiors felt that his face did not fit, or because he was too honest.

Eighteen years down the track, it is time for justice to be done. Mr. Warren has received an apology, but cannot live off an apology. He deserves financial compensation that is commensurate with the injustice that he has suffered, and is entitled to have his allegations against Dr. Bott recorded. Nothing less is required from the Met and the Home Office.

12.42 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on securing the debate. This is a long-standing issue, as he explained, and I respect his sense of duty as a constituency Member of Parliament in taking up his constituent's case in the way in which his predecessor did. I acknowledge the tribute that he paid to his predecessor's work in that respect.

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

The case is unusual in that it has continued for 15 years. It was considered by the High Court in 1988 and by the Court of Appeal in 1989, and was raised in the House in 1994. It has been the subject of much correspondence.

Before going into the details of the matter, I should like to respond to an aspect of the hon. Gentleman's speech which was unwarranted. His use of the word "vendetta" was not appropriate. The Metropolitan police has demonstrated at very senior levels its keenness to resolve the matter. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman testified to meetings that he and his colleagues have had with senior police officers. That belies the charge that a vendetta of some kind is preventing agreement from being reached.

Mr. Brake: I thank the Minister for giving way. I should put on the record the fact that I have had very positive dealings with senior officers in the Met, who are willing to put some effort into securing a resolution to the case. However, if one looks at the beginning of the case history, it is clear from the behaviour of some of the characters who were initially involved that there was a concerted effort on the part of a small number of officers to get Mr. Warren removed from his position.

Mr. Clarke: I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's allegations regarding the time at which the matter first arose. I thought that he was suggesting that a current vendetta was making it more difficult to resolve the situation. I apologise if I misunderstood him, and take it from his remarks that he is not suggesting that that is the case. The hon. Gentleman's correspondence with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, copies of which he has sent to me, makes it clear that the hon. Gentleman is making positive efforts to resolve the matter, and the police are clearly trying to move in the same direction.

Many of the salient facts of the case are not in dispute, but it has still proved to be impossible to resolve. It is primarily a matter for the Commissioner, who has expressed to the hon. Gentleman his view that it is a matter of great sadness that Mr. Warren has been unable to agree a settlement, despite the efforts that have been made over the years by all parties. Everybody involved in this regrettable case is keen to achieve a resolution, and I appreciate that that is the spirit in which the hon. Gentleman made his speech.

I shall not repeat the detailed history of the case, because the hon. Gentleman has already fairly and accurately summarised the key points. The courts—I emphasise that it is the courts—have determined that the appropriate procedures for Mr. Warren's compulsory medical retirement from the Metropolitan police service were not followed. It is accepted that Mr. Warren was treated unfairly and unlawfully. It is important to place that acceptance on record, because it acknowledges some of the hon. Gentleman's points.

The courts awarded Mr. Warren a total sum of about £16,800 in respect of pay and allowances due to him, plus interest. However, in the light of the references that have been made to the history of the matter, it is important to reinforce the point that the courts declined to order Mr. Warren's reinstatement. Although they acknowledged the points that the hon. Gentleman has made, and made an award in respect of pay and allowances, they did not think it right to order the reinstatement of Mr. Warren after they had taken the full situation into account.

The courts—I emphasise that it was the courts, rather than the Commissioner, the Government or me—expressed the view that

"there has been no intention to injure Mr. Warren on the part of anybody".

I put that quotation on the record in the light of my exchange with the hon. Gentleman about the attitudes of various concerned parties. I understand from my experience of grievances that my constituents have raised with me that people are by no means always satisfied with the verdicts that come down through the legal system and seek redress in a variety of ways. I understand why the court's view may be unpalatable to some people, but it is important that it should be placed on the record.

I turn to the hon. Gentleman's four points about seeking redress and resolving the matter. In addition to the sums awarded by the courts, which is a separate consideration, the Metropolitan police have sought to offer redress in a number of other ways. First, Mr. Warren has received a formal apology from the Commissioner, and I place on the record my appreciation of the generous spirit in which the hon. Gentleman acknowledged that in his speech. I accept, as he said, that it took some time to reach that point. However, the apology was made—and generously made—and I am glad that he acknowledges that fact.

Secondly, Mr. Warren has been offered a further apology, as well as the reissuing of a certificate of service. That is in line with Mr. Warren's wishes. As the hon. Gentleman said, some outstanding matters remain to be resolved—in relation to precise timings, for example. However, the Metropolitan police believe that it will be possible to arrive at a resolution of those matters following good-hearted discussions by all sides.

Thirdly, the hon. Gentleman raised the question of money, specifically the ex gratia payment. As he noted in his speech, the Metropolitan police have offered Mr. Warren an ex gratia payment of £85,000 in respect of the various judgments and decisions that have been referred to. I understand that Mr. Warren is unwilling to accept that proposed settlement. He believes that the quantum of the ex gratia payment is insufficient—for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman explained in his speech—and wishes the allegations that he has made of criminal conduct on the part of the medical officer involved to be pursued. I shall deal with the latter issue in a moment.

If aggreement can be reached about the ex gratia payment, that is fine, but I have a duty to consider the proper use of public money. No Government would sign blank cheques in that way and I would have to look carefully at the matter. The offer from the Metropolitan police is reasonable and I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman will say so to his constituent and argue that it could form the basis of an agreement.

I come to the nub of the matter, which was the hon. Gentleman's third point: the issue of the allegations against Dr. Bott. I wish to emphasise several points in

this connection. The first is on the history of the case. The then assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan police, John Smith, considered Mr. Warren's allegation of perjury against Dr. Bott in 1988—11 years ago—and took the view that there was no evidence of an offence under section 5 of the Perjury Act 1911.

Mr. Brake: I am aware that that was the finding, but can the Minister explain how that conclusion was reached when no investigating officer was appointed to the case and the Metropolitan police did not listen to the tape recordings of discussions with Dr. Bott that Mr. Warren says are in his possession and support his allegations that Dr. Bott committed perjury?

Mr. Clarke: That is not my function. I have not had a quasi-judicial role in looking at the history of the case. However, the courts have and I now come to that.

As I said, the then assistant Commissioner, John Smith, considered Mr. Warren's allegations in 1988 and took the view that there was no evidence of an offence under section 5 of the Perjury Act 1911. Mr. Warren's allegation then formed part of his application to the divisional court and the Court of Appeal, which both dismissed his appeal for reinstatement. Following that resolution of Mr. Warren's grievance, the current deputy Commissioner—soon to be Commissioner John Stevens, wrote to Mr. Warren on 11 January 1999, almost a year ago today, stating that the matter had been fully considered. As there was no further evidence, the deputy Commissioner did not consider it appropriate to reopen the case.

I am advised that Mr. Warren has produced no new evidence on the matter. I acknowledge the points about tape recordings and other matters, but unless genuinely new evidence is produced—evidence other than that which was considered by the deputy Commissioner and then by the courts—there are no grounds for reopening the matter. It has been dealt with through our legal system, by the divisional court and the Court of Appeal. That judgment will be unwelcome to Mr. Warren, and possibly to the hon. Gentleman, Mr. Warren's Member of Parliament, but a considered judgment of the court can be reopened only if it can be clearly demonstrated that new evidence and new circumstances justify doing so. At this stage, I see no such evidence.

My conclusion is therefore that the deputy Commissioner has made it clear that he feels that he has reached a point where he cannot reasonably do more to meet Mr. Warren's demand. I believe—the hon. Gentleman's speech confirmed this—that Mr. Warren's determination to pursue his allegation against Dr. Bott seems the major obstacle to making progress in the case. Of the four points raised by the hon. Gentleman, the first two are susceptible to resolution, the third, on the amount of money, is a matter about which everyone will have a different opinion, although I am bound by the consideration of the right spending of public money, and the fourth, on the allegations against the medical officer, appears to be an absolute block to reaching an agreement.

I understand that the hon. Gentleman is seeking further discussions with the Metropolitan police to try to achieve a settlement. I commend him and the Metropolitan police for trying to move the matter forward, but I am certain that reaching any satisfactory agreement is likely to involve compromise between the parties concerned, as in all cases of this type.

Mr. Brake: I raised two specific points that have not been addressed. Maybe the Minister will write to me about them in the next couple of days, but will he tell me now whether the police can avoid recording an allegation of crime and what view, if any, the Home Office has on an independent assessment of the financial compensation package?

Mr. Clarke: I thought that I dealt with the second point in what I said about the money. Perhaps I was not clear enough. I was trying to say that, whatever investigation process is achieved, I shall still need to be satisfied that the amount of money proposed as a solution is a good and proper use of public funds. I acknowledge that one consideration in that regard is the desirability of achieving a solution to the situation so that it does not in various ways keep taking up time, resources and energy. An independent investigation may be agreed by all parties as an appropriate way forward, but I am not in a position to sign the Government up to saying that we will automatically fund whatever comes out of that process. We have to look at the amount of money that is recommended and come to a view about what is proper public spending. I did not address the hon. Gentleman's first point on the recording of allegations and will write to him on it, because he was making a general point about the way in which the police codes operate and how they can be addressed.

I conclude by saying that it is essential that any proposed settlement of the case be fair to the interests of all the parties involved, including the Metropolitan police, Mr. Warren and Dr. Bott. A settlement must be defensible in law and represent a proper use of public money and those criteria need to be taken into consideration in trying to reach a successful conclusion. I shall continue to look at the situation with those considerations in mind and hope that all parties involved seek to reach an agreement that respects those principles and moves them forward. As I think all parties would agree—certainly, judging from his opening speech, the hon. Gentleman would—the case has carried on for an unconscionable time. We must find a resolution that meets the honour of everyone concerned.

I studied the background to the case before the debate, as I knew nothing about it beforehand. I also listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said. I remain of the view that the main obstacle to achieving the kind of resolution that I have described remains how the questions and allegations about Dr. Bott's conduct are dealt with. There is a danger that we will be caught between a rock and a hard place and I urge the hon. Gentleman, on behalf of his constituent, to do whatever he can—as I know from past experience he will want to do—to ensure a proper solution.

Serbia and Kosovo

1 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): This is a stuffy, smelly, airless room that is no substitute for the Chamber.

Since 10 June 1999, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation entered Kosovo, no fewer than 200,000 non-Serbs have left the province, and that trend continues. The new wave of refugees has added more difficulties to the economy, which was partly destroyed as a result of NATO bombing, with the additional burden of many years of sanctions.

This winter, only 30 per cent. of homes in Serbia are adequately heated. Those that are well heated are the ones with gas heating, and Russia has greatly alleviated the shortage of energy by providing gas. However, 70 per cent. of homes are poorly heated or not heated at all, and all the hospitals are inadequately heated.

We must bear it in mind that one element of Yugoslavia's energy system—oil—is in short supply because of sanctions. Those who have oil heating are trying to switch to electricity, which is costly. The problem affects pensioners in particular, whose pensions are often not more than DM60 a month—roughly £24. They simply cannot afford to pay the electricity bills.

Schools are also inadequately heated. In December and early January, the temperatures in Yugoslavia were as low as minus 13 deg. Yugoslav people, a great many of whom have little or no political persuasion, feel that the American and British Governments are putting an extra strain on their prolonged suffering. As a result of poor heating, the recent flu epidemic, which was serious enough here, hit Serbia even more seriously, and information is now emerging that doctors and pharmacists do not have even the most basic medication.

Owing to NATO intervention and the continuation of sanctions, the most vulnerable people in society are suffering—children, the sick and the old. As the Minister knows, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and several others, I bitterly opposed the bombing before it happened and the hypocritical actions of politicians. The contrasts with Chechnya are becoming all too apparent.

In Kosovo, not a day goes by without Serbs being killed. Many non-Albanians are physically abused and kidnapped, and Serbian houses are being bombed and torched. Most information comes out of the region via refugees in Kosovo and radio amateurs. It is rather difficult to explain why the British Government and the British press are not reporting such news—of which they were full months ago—about what is really happening.

On 7 January, the Orthodox Christmas day, at 8.30 am, in Prizren, two Serb women on their way to church were killed by Albanian extremists. An effort has been made to find out about the incident, but I am told that neither the United Nations nor KFOR would co-operate. However, Susan Manuel, a UN spokeswoman, stated that on Wednesday 5 January, a 39-year-old Serb was shot three times in the head, also in Prizren. With the number of non-Albanians now being killed and the violence not decreasing, the authorities are withholding the names of those who have been killed or abused.

On 9 January, at 1.30 pm, an Albanian killed a Serb, Rodoljub Gasic, aged 47, who was sawing up logs in front of his house. KFOR members arrived to investigate the incident one hour later, even though it happened in Gnjilane, near the KFOR post. KFOR is overseeing what is little less than the genocide of Serbs in Kosovo. As a further example, in the town of Vitina, of a population of 3,000 Serbs many have been killed and only about 800 remain. Those who remain live in ghettos.

Further relevant facts illustrate the situation in Kosovo. Graveyards in Prizren and Urosevac, as in other parts of Kosovo, have been destroyed and desecrated. Fifty-six churches have been destroyed, and some were even bombed during the Orthodox Christmas. Unexploded cluster bombs that NATO dropped throughout Kosovo are taking their toll. The first question of which I gave notice related to cluster bombs. What is being done about the Human Rights Watch report?

Several hon. Members attended a very moving session with Professor Douglas Rokke, a patriotic American who was head of one of the investigating units. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office knew about his visit, and I said that there was a full report in *The Scotsman* under the bylines of Tim Llewelyn and Conal Urquhart. Does the Minister have anything to say about that? My third point relates to policy towards enclaves and the idea that, in order to protect such Serbs as remain, enclaves should be formed.

My fourth point is perhaps less weighty, but I ask for comment nevertheless. When my friend Craig Brown, the Scottish football team manager, proposed that the Scottish side might play in Belgrade, a ton of coals descended on his head for making such a suggestion. I may be wrong, but I thought that we had no quarrel with the Serb people. If that is so, what is the Government's attitude towards Craig Brown's proposal?

My fifth point relates to the speeding up of a film about the Grdelica train bombing, in which at least 14 civilians were killed. A videotape shown by NATO to explain the killing of those civilians on a train on a bridge in Serbia last April was shown at triple speed. The alliance has tried to excuse the killing of those civilians by saying that the train was travelling too fast for the missiles' trajectory to be changed in time. As I understand it, NATO war planes fired two missiles at the 50 m long bridge over the Juzna Morava river at Klisura, some 300 km south of Belgrade, on 12 April during the campaign to force Belgrade's troops to leave Kosovo.

NATO's supreme commander in Europe, General Clark, shortly afterwards showed two videotapes of the train apparently travelling fast on the bridge, and said that it had been impossible to alter the missiles' trajectories. The German press said that the two videotapes were shown at three times normal speed. A spokesman for NATO's military command in Mons in Belgium acknowledged in a telephone interview with Agence France-Presse that those images had been altered by "a technical problem".

Yesterday, along with George Alagiah and the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), I took part in a long Esther Rantzen programme at Television Centre, in

which I had an exchange with Jamie Shea on the issue. Mr. Shea's answers were totally unconvincing. I wonder whether the Government have a more convincing answer.

I leave time for the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall).

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. The hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) suggested that he would like the hon. Member for Uxbridge to take part. Has either of them notified the Minister and sought his approval?

Mr. Dalyell: Of course. I sent copies of my letters to Madam Speaker to the Foreign Office.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am grateful, as that is courteous and appropriate.

1.10 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I am grateful to have the opportunity to take part in the debate. I feel privileged to follow the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). Not only do I agree with everything that he has said so far, even down to his comment about the atmosphere of the Chamber, but he provides an example to me as a new Member of the targets that a Back Bencher can and should achieve.

The hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) and I were fortunate to visit Montenegro a few weeks ago as part of a delegation from the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. We had the opportunity to speak to representatives of all the political parties and many other organisations from that country, and were fortunate also to speak to members of Serbian opposition parties who had travelled to Podgorica to discuss matters with us.

Some of us have believed for a long time, although it is generally disregarded in this and other western countries, that the NATO bombing had only a negative effect on the opposition forces trying to bring real democracy to Serbia. The opposition parties told us repeatedly that their job has been made 10 times worse. One of the main culprits that they blamed for their lack of movement was the American Government, who for a long time sustained the Milosevic regime because they could do business with it. When there might have been an opposition boycott of elections, the American envoy pooh-poohed the idea. Opposition parties regarded that as a major setback to their own progress towards democracy.

The opposition is highly fragmented and demoralised, and there is a plethora of opposition parties. There are more than 180 political parties in Serbia and a current joke, if it can be called a joke, is that, if two Serbs are in a room, the result will be three political parties.

There are one or two encouraging signs. Students have started a movement rather than a political party, which is called Otpor, and I sincerely hope that the British Government will give not only moral support but something more concrete to those who want to bring real change to the country.

There is a great feeling among the people in Serbia that they have been victimised, although we keep saying that our argument is not with them. A readily acceptable way to show that would be to have some visits from sports teams, such as the visit from the Scottish football team that the hon. Member for Linlithgow mentioned. Something of that nature would establish relations not at a political level, but at a human one. I suggest that Red Star Belgrade, which has now been depoliticised, might be a suitable opposition. There is an hon. Member connected with Coventry City football club—I believe that Coventry is twinned with Belgrade—so something of that sort could be possible. Such an event would help the Serbian people to realise that our argument is not with them, but with the regime.

I cannot stress the need to relax sanctions strongly enough, especially those on air travel, which affect Montenegro as well as Serbia. It was suggested to me that the sanctions against certain members of the regime and the ruling party would be more effective if other people could travel freely while they were denied access. The blanket nature of sanctions means that we are victimising a nation for the actions of a few.

I cannot think of a better way to start the process of bringing Serbia back into the international community than building bridges, which would be symbolic and actual. It would not simply be moral or intended to improve people's lives. There is also a commercial reason. I have heard that many of our European Union partners are busy quietly behind the scenes, working to establish contacts, and I fear that when relations are normalised, the British Government and the British people will be the losers.

1.17 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Keith Vaz): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) on securing the debate. He is one of the Members of Parliament whom I most admire, and I know that he has deep concerns about the issue. I recognise his generosity in allowing the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) to contribute to the debate. I know of his interest in the matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow referred to the situation in Kosovo and Serbia. I hope that hon. Members will find it useful if I address the subject of what Britain and our partners in the international community are doing to tackle the challenges, both immediate and longer term, that we face in the Balkans.

The successive crises of former Yugoslavia over the past decade show that the greatest obstacle to progress remains the policies of ethnic hatred and violence pursued by the regime of President Milosevic. He laid the seeds for conflict in Kosovo 10 years ago when he robbed that province of its autonomy.

Throughout the 1990s, despite international pressure, Milosevic refused to address legitimate demands from Kosovo Albanians for a political settlement. When those demands became radicalised, his forces responded with wholly disproportionate violence. Milosevic threw away the chance for a peaceful solution to Kosovo. That was bad enough, but, at the same time as his delegation pretended to negotiate a Kosovo settlement, his forces began an offensive, not only attacking the Kosovo Liberation Army but terrifying innocent men, women and children and driving them from their homes.

Faced with the need to avert an humanitarian disaster, all 19 Governments of NATO were clear that the alliance had to act. NATO's intervention was an

[Mr. Keith Vaz]

important setback to the policies of extreme nationalism, which have done such damage in the former Yugoslavia during the past decade. We now have the opportunity to press home our advantage and push for genuine change throughout the region.

Let me start with Kosovo. My hon. Friend kindly contacted my office yesterday to forewarn me of several questions that he was planning to ask today, which he has indeed asked. In the time available, I can give him only brief answers, but if he wishes, I should be happy to write to him after the debate to give him more details.

My hon. Friend referred to the recent press reports about the air strike on 12 April on the railroad bridge at Grdelica, in which a train crossing the bridge was hit accidentally. NATO has acknowledged that, by accident, the video footage of the incident was played back at higher than normal speed. It went to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties. A handful of accidents occurred out of 8,000 bombing missions. NATO's painstaking approach stands in stark contrast to the brutality of the Milosevic regime's ethnic cleansing policy.

My hon. Friend referred also to the use of cluster bombs in Kosovo. KFOR, including United Kingdom troops, has made a major effort to clear cluster bombs from Kosovo. The United Kingdom sector is now 80 per cent. clear. KFOR has also had the huge task of clearing mines left by Serb forces in Kosovo. Clearance efforts have concentrated on highly populated areas, including schools, of which more than 600 have now been cleared. Several deaths and injuries have occurred as a result of unexploded cluster bombs, which is why the clearance effort is so important.

My hon. Friend also referred to the use of depleted uranium. That was not used by United Kingdom troops. It is not prohibited by any international convention. It is not regarded by the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection as a health hazard.

My hon. Friend also wrote to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary about the press reports that the Scotland football team had been invited to play against the former Yugoslav republic, a point that he repeated today and that was also referred to by the hon. Member for Uxbridge. We do not discourage sporting links with the FRY, but the Scottish Football Association will doubtless wish to take into account the Foreign Office's advice on travel to Serbia and the lack of international flights into Belgrade.

Let me cover briefly the Government's approach to Kosovo. We have an opportunity in Kosovo to build a society based on modern European values: plural democracy, free media, open markets and the rule of law. The rebuilding of Kosovo is a massive task after decades of neglect and destruction wrought by Serbian oppression. The international community is making a massive investment through the UN mission, the NATO-led Kosovo force and bilateral aid via charities and non-governmental organisations. Britain continues rightly to play a leading role.

Since March last year, the Department for International Development has committed £90 million to Kosovo: first, for humanitarian relief and now for rebuilding. British expertise, our soldiers and police officers have played an exceptional role. Progress has been made, but serious problems remain.

My hon. Friend raised the situation of minorities in Kosovo. The security situation, particularly for the minorities, remains of real concern to the Government. Many Serbs and other minorities fled Kosovo following the withdrawal of Serb forces in June. Some may have had good reason to flee, fearing indictment for war crimes, but many simply feared that they would be victims of revenge killings. Many left following violence and intimidation.

The European Union has made clear our condemnation of ethnic violence on any side. We have said that our substantial contribution to rebuilding Kosovo—as much as 500 million euros next year—would be affected if ethnic violence and intimidation continued. KFOR and the United Nations mission in Kosovo—UNMIK—are devoting a lot of time and effort to protecting the Serbs and other minorities in Kosovo. British soldiers live with Serb families in Pristina. They escort old people to the shops and younger people to schools and places of work, but that can be only a temporary solution, dealing with the symptoms rather than the disease. The lasting answer lies in building confidence among the communities and fostering hope and reconciliation.

Hon. Members have asked today why we are not helping to rebuild Serbia as we are helping in Kosovo. Our response is quite clear. The responsibility for what has gone wrong in Serbia rests with Milosevic, not with us. The targets that NATO hit in Serbia were chosen because of their high military value to the regime, which was conducting appalling repression in Kosovo. NATO's campaign was legitimate; it was necessitated by the actions of the Belgrade Government and Belgrade must take full responsibility for the results.

We have no quarrel with the people of Serbia. Our problem is with their leadership. We want Serbia to take its rightful place in the mainstream of modern Europe. It should, like its neighbours, including Montenegro, be participating in the stability pact and thus benefit from foreign investment, trade and co-operation, but Serbia cannot take part while it is ruled by men who are indicted for crimes against humanity. The EU and NATO are united on that, which is why we believe economic sanctions targeted on the regime should remain in place until there is real political change.

International policy is neither passive nor negative. We want to act to encourage change in Serbia. The European Union has set out in a public declaration to the people of Serbia the new opportunities of trade, investment and closer relations that will open up once again when they replace their current Government with a body that embraces the values of democracy, pluralism and tolerance. Last year, the British Government set up a special £3 million fund to provide help and support for the independent media and civil society across the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. We are working to develop a professional, liberal media. We are running a series of conferences to bring together leading figures in Serbian society and the democratic opposition with their counterparts in Britain. We are

building co-operation between United Kingdom local authorities and municipalities in Serbia that are run by the democratic opposition.

Mr. Dalyell: What did the Secretary of State for International Development mean when she said that the west was ready to move if there was a health catastrophe in Serbia? Do we have plans to help in the event of such a catastrophe?

Mr. Vaz: We are always watching and monitoring the situation carefully. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development was saying that Britain stands ready to help in any way. I have demonstrated in my speech today how much support we have given in Serbia.

The international community is in place on the ground in Serbia providing genuine humanitarian help. That will continue throughout winter and beyond. We must be wary, however, of playing into Milosevic's hands. His regime exercises control, often through corruption and cronies, across much of the Serbian economy, public and private sector alike. He, his family and their political and business allies have grown rich over the years as they have led their country into economic isolation and impoverishment. We must ensure that our aid is targeted carefully and that it goes to the families of those in need, not to the bank accounts of those who seek to exploit them.

I am sorry that I have not had the time this afternoon to answer all the points about Montenegro that my hon. Friend has mentioned. However, my door is open if he wishes to discuss with me the results of his visit to Montenegro and I shall be more than happy to see him. The Government remain committed to ensuring that the region is peaceful and prosperous once again.

Rent Officers (Stockport)

1.30 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I am grateful for the opportunity to tell hon. Members about the situation facing some 3,300 tenants in Stockport who have tenancy agreements with private landlords and who are in receipt of housing benefit.

Housing benefit is a complex area of benefits legislation. I shall focus on one aspect only, which is the support given by the Rent Service. To prevent abuse of housing benefit, there is a ceiling on the amount that will be paid to landlords for a property, which is based on its size and geographical location. The determination of that ceiling is in the hands of the rent officer service—recently renamed the Rent Service. Today's debate is necessary because of the arbitrary behaviour of the service for Greater Manchester and its determination of rent levels in Stockport. It has set rents at a different and inappropriate level, compared with those of a short time ago.

This time last year, the rent officer said that the standard reference rent—the fair rent—for a three-room property in Stockport was £98 a week. In setting that rent, the rent officer was also providing an opportunity for a prospective tenant to approach him and say, "I am considering taking out a tenancy agreement. What is the ceiling for the property?" That is a pre-tenancy determination. The rent officer issued certificates saying, "We will give your landlord £98 a week in support of your tenancy." Reassured by that offer, many of my constituents went on to make tenancy agreements with landlords; they paid deposits and moved into the property. Many of them may have subsequently sent their children to school, taken up local training courses and settled into a peaceful life in the community where they live.

During the course of last year, the rent officer changed his mind. Instead of offering £98 a week support for tenancies, he said that it would be reduced to £75 a week. That is a reduction of £23 a week for the standard reference rent for three-roomed accommodation. Housing benefit is paid not to the tenant, but direct to the landlord. For many tenants, the first time that they became aware of the problems was when the landlord got in touch with them to say, "Your arrears are running at £23 a week. Your deposit is being eroded, so what are you going to do about it?"

What is going to be done? The Government's official advice, which is contained in their benefits leaflets, is that tenants should try to negotiate a lower rent with their landlords. That is completely unrealistic. The Government rent and lease property in Stockport. The idea that even they can go to their landords asking to renegotiate the rent downwards because they do not have the money is absurd. To expect those at the bottom of the economic pile to be able to do so is not feasible.

What alternatives do tenants have? They can surrender their tenancies or sit it out and face eviction. In either case, they are likely to find that the deposit that they need to go into another property has been eaten up by arrears. Many approach the council to draw on its exceptional hardship fund, which is a statutory requirement that the council has been drawing from in considerable amounts in the past few months. The

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exceptional hardship fund is exactly that: it must be for exceptional hardship. The council has received advice that it cannot make a class decision that all such people so affected can be paid.

Tenants can do what a number of them have done in Stockport and band together to take legal action against the Rent Service. There are plans for judicial review on the grounds of the unreasonableness of decisions, but tenants cannot appeal against a decision. There is no appeals system. Instead, they can go for a reassessment, which is not an appeal but a retrial. There are dire warnings to tenants who set off on this course that it is a retrial, so the sentence could be increased. They will not necessarily benefit from such action.

That official advice is also somewhat misleading. I made some inquiries to discover the position regarding reassessments in the north-west. About a quarter of all reassessments result in the tenant benefitting; about three quarters result in no change on the original rent officer's assessment; and about 3 per cent. result in a worsening of the tenant's position. Understandably, tenants who have already taken a hit of £23 a week, or more in some cases—we have recorded cases of more than £35 a week drop in support—are reluctant to opt for reassessment, with the possibility of their position being made worse.

I wonder whether I can tempt you to take a short journey along the A6, Mr. Deputy Speaker—a road that we both know well—from Manchester, somewhere around the area of Longsight, through to Poynton in your constituency. In October 1998, if I had wanted to take out a tenancy of four rooms in Manchester, let us say in Longsight, the rent officer believed that the support that I should get was £75.55 a week. By the time we have reached the middle of Stockport, for the same accommodation, the rent officer thought that the amount should be £90 a week. If we go a little further, to High Lane, the amount is £107.50 a week. In Disley and Poynton the rent support is £121.59 a week.

I know that you cannot participate in the debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but you may be able to nod and encourage the Minister to make a helpful reply. That gradient of increasing property values fairly reflects the position along that stretch of road. There is a £15 increase from Longsight to Stockport, another £17 to High Lane and a further £14 to Disley and Poynton. I can still get my £76 a week in Longsight, but in Stockport and Hazel Grove, I am restricted to £84. If I am in Disley or Poynton, I can continue to receive £121.

The differential between the centre of Manchester and High Lane is 10 per cent. and the differential between High Lane and Poynton and Disley is 44 per cent. That is a manifest and gigantic step which is out of kilter with reality.

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): The hon. Gentleman ought to make at least some comparison between the private sector and the semi-public sector. Will he say what housing association rents are along that same gradient for probably rather better property? Does he accept that rents for housing association properties are about a third lower and that council rents along that same gradient are probably half that level? Is it not a problem that private landlords in Stockport, in particular, have been ripping off the public purse with the levels of rent that they have been charging?

Mr. Stunell: No, it is not, I cite my own experience. About nine years ago, I rented property in my constituency. I was looking for the most economical accommodation and I was paying £390 a month. That is similar to the sum that was permitted until a year ago. The private rented sector in Stockport is no different from elsewhere. It reflects the pressure of demand. I remind the hon. Gentleman that about 6,000 people in Stockport are awaiting accommodation. The council cannot house them and only private rented accommodation is available. The overall result is that it is not now possible to rent private accommodation in my constituency and receive 100 per cent. payment of housing benefit. As a result, people are having to leave home and withdraw their children from school. We are facing economic cleansing. Poor people who need rented accommodation are no longer able to live in Hazel Grove.

Why is there such a discrepancy? Perhaps the answer is connected to the point raised by the hon. Gentleman. When I approached the rent officer, the first reason that he gave me was that Stockport has two separate locations, which makes no sense, and that there should be only one. His argument appeared to be that one area has one ceiling, that the other area has a different ceiling and that both areas should clearly have the same ceiling. Fair enough, it is a thought; but surely the solution is not to reduce the lower ceiling by £6 and the higher one by even more.

The rent officer's second reason was that rents in Stockport are too high. My personal experience is that market forces appear to be operating exactly as one would expect. However, his third argument was the one that I found most difficult to accept. He suggested that the people affected should buy, not rent. He said that mortgage rates are now so low that it would be cheaper to buy a property than to rent it. He ignored the fact that those people are on benefit. They are on the poverty level, in many cases with no source of employment. For them, the option of buying does not exist.

Next, there is the "nod, nod, wink, wink" reason, which seems to be used in private whenever rent officers from other areas visit Stockport to make their reassessments; but the visitors, too, are puzzled. They do not understand why it happens, but they know that it helps to reduce expenditure. Will the Minister tell us whether the rent officer is conforming to a genuine Government directive, or what he believes to be a Government directive to reduce public expenditure—or has he simply decided to leave a time bomb for the newly reorganised service to face?

What I want to hear from the Minister is exactly the same as Stockport council wanted to hear when it wrote to the Department of Social Security on 12 November 1999—a letter to which, as of yesterday, no answer has yet been received. First, I want him to call off the rent officer. He should make a clear statement today that the Government do not want the housing benefit system to be used to cause the wholesale disruption of local communities. Tenants should not be used as a battering

ram to knock down Government expenditure. I want the Minister to tell the rent officer to reconsider the idea of restoring—

Mr. Bennett: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has sought the permission of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) to intervene. It is a grey area. I shall permit interventions, provided that they are brief, but this is a private debate between the hon. Member for Hazel Grove and the Minister.

Mr. Stunell: On time grounds, I do not think that I can give way now. The hon. Gentleman had not approached me previously.

I want the Minister to ask the rent officer to consider restoring the two localities and to consider whether rent levels from Manchester, through central Stockport, to the suburbs and commuter villages beyond were not more realistic in October 1998 than in October 1999.

Next, I want pre-tenancy determinations to be valid for longer than the existing six months, which will create a cushion. When tenants take out annual tenancies, which is common in Stockport, they sign them in good faith. Those tenancies should not be put in peril by a rent officer's decision that they can neither avoid nor appeal against. When tenants initiate a redetermination following the rent officer's assessment, and it results in a further worsening of the tenant's position, I want a guarantee that it will in turn be frozen, because it is the only appeals system available. It is entirely unjust that a tenant should be prevented or restrained from resorting to the system simply because he might make his situation worse.

Lastly, I want to hear the Minister say that those problems will be carefully considered in the long-promised White Paper on housing policy, and that the Government intend to safeguard tenants from such abrupt and arbitrary changes and reductions in benefit—and to give them effective remedies when it happens.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to raise this matter. I look forward to the Minister's response.

1.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) has raised an important matter. He asked about the role of the rent officer. It is to assess whether housing benefit claimants are being asked to pay more than the going rate in the open market. Rent offices do that by identifying what a person not on housing benefit would be prepared to pay for the dwelling concerned. The process involves a number of determinations, including the local reference rent, which effectively places a cap on the amount of housing benefit that a tenant can obtain, and it is linked to the general level of rents for similar properties in the area. It is therefore vital to ensure that rent officers perform their valuations accurately and consistently.

I should make it clear that rent officers are independent and that their advice should be impartial. Neither I nor my ministerial colleagues have any authority to intervene in or overturn their decisions. However, my Department has responsibility for overseeing the work of rent officers, and I clearly have a duty to ensure that they are organised in a professional manner and are accountable for their decisions.

Our drive to modernise and improve Government was the main reason why we decided, in October 1998, to establish an agency for rent officers. Previously, the service consisted of 77 separate and largely unaccountable rent registration areas. Of course, there is no question of the independent status of rent officers diminishing under the agency. However, the establishment of the agency means that, for the first time, rent officers will operate within a central management framework that is committed to greater openness, more accountability and greater consistency.

I listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman had to say about the difficulties that some of his constituents face because of the recent determinations made by rent officers, and I am sympathetic to those difficulties. I recognise the serious consequences that flow when a tenant who has lived in a property for several years is faced with the stark choice of having to move because he can no longer afford to pay the rent.

The overriding objective of the housing benefit system is to enable those with no income of their own and those on low incomes to provide for their reasonable housing costs. The housing benefit system should cover reasonable rents that reflect the general level for similar properties in the area. However, housing benefit should not subsidise someone to live in a property that is unreasonably expensive. If it did, tenants would understandably have no incentive to look for more reasonably priced accommodation and landlords would have no incentive to seek more reasonable rents.

A fundamental principle of the regulations that the rent officers are required to follow is that their determinations must be based on rent levels that are being achieved in the open market. In that way, the possibility of housing benefit leading the market is negated. Of course, a rent officer does not endear himself to landlords or tenants by bearing down on rent levels. However, if all the evidence points to determining the rent lower than the expectations of the landlord and tenant, that is usually the right thing to do.

To understand the problems that have arisen in Stockport, it is important to bear in mind the local rental market conditions to which rent officers must have regard and which the hon. Gentleman described. Evidence collected by rent officers suggests that there is an oversupply of accommodation to let and that rent levels in the open market have been falling as a result. I accept that that is not likely to be the case in all parts of Stockport or for all types of accommodation, but the fact is that rent officers have taken the view that there is generally no scarcity of accommodation stoking up rent levels in the area.

Rent officers must regularly test the accuracy of market evidence and keep their market evidence database constantly under review. I understand that a comprehensive review of the rental market throughout Greater Manchester was undertaken in November 1998 and that it was repeated in June and December last year. I also understand that senior management in the Rent Service has considered circumstances in Stockport

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closely and it concluded that rent officers have been following good and professional valuation practices. I have no reason to doubt that. However, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove has rightly dwelt on the consequences of some of the decisions, however reasonable, and it is right that we should attempt to address them.

Ms Ann Coffey (Stockport) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please be very brief.

Ms Coffey: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for giving way. The circumstances are very complicated, and he will be aware that more than £21 million of Government subsidy came into the private market in Stockport last year. At the same time, there are empty council properties, although I accept the remarks of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) about his constituency. As a way forward, will my hon. Friend agree to meet all Stockport Members of Parliament to discuss the matter in greater depth? The hon. Member fror Hazel Grove has made a valid point about the consequences in individual cases.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must ask the hon. Lady to resume her seat. I do not believe that she has done the hon. Member whose debate this is the courtesy of asking him whether she can intervene.

Mr. Bennett: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I understood that the conventions of Westminster Hall were to be the same as those in the main Chamber, where an hon. Member can seek to intervene without notice and the hon. Member making a speech may give way if he or she wishes. If we wish to take part in the debate, and want time to do so, we should ask the hon. Member in question. Surely we are entitled to the same conventions as those of the Chamber, which allow us to intervene if the speaker is prepared to give way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member is right to say that the procedures in this place are the same as those in the main Chamber. During an Adjournment debate, it is important for hon. Members who wish to intervene to seek not only the permission of the hon. Member who has initiated the debate, but that of the Minister. Two interventions are allowed, and I have allowed them. We are taking time from the debate initiated by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove.

Mr. Mullin: My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) made a reasonable suggestion, which I am minded to accept and to which I shall return in a moment.

I should put some figures on record. Stockport council's welfare rights units reports various difficulties relating to recent rent officer determinations in the area. Of 2,110 tenants covered by the relevant housing benefit regulations, 400 have so far received a decrease in their benefit. Shortfalls are between £5 and £30 a week, although I know that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove referred to one of £35. As he said, such tenants have to negotiate a lower rent, find the difference from another source or move. The council has so far awarded 140 exceptional hardship payments, at a cost of £51,000. As far as I am aware, no evictions have yet been made.

I am in a difficult position. I have had very short notice of the points that the hon. Gentleman wants me to consider, although I make no complaint about that. My powers are limited, and I cannot direct a rent officer. I am sure that he agrees that it is desirable that landlords should not be able to milk the housing benefit system, especially when a great deal of public housing that might be better used is lying idle. I acknowledge the difficulties faced by some of his constituents, which he outlined graphically.

I cannot promise to satisfy the hon. Gentleman, but it would be helpful to consider the matter in more detail than has been possible in the short time available to me. I propose that all three Members of Parliament representing Stockport constituencies—

Mr. Stunell: There are four.

Mr. Mullin: I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. There are four. I propose that those four hon. Members, representatives of Stockport council and the rent officer should come to see me so that we can discuss the matter rationally and calmly, first, to understand the consequences and, secondly, to find out whether there is a way of mitigating them.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 January 2000

[MR MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

GMOs and Biotechnology

[*Relevant documents: First Report from the Science and Technology Committee Session 1998–99 HC 286 and the Government response thereto (Cm 4527) and Fifth Report from the Environmental Audit Committee Session 1998–99 HC 384 and the Government response thereto (Cm 4528).*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

2.30 pm

Dr. Michael Clark (Rayleigh): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for calling me to open the debate and for allowing it to take place in Westminster Hall so early in the new year. I have not spoken here before and I am pleased to do so today, as I am to share the debate with members of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam). I am also pleased that we are not divided by party, but that we sit among those with whom we have a common interest in scientific matters. It is a good format for a Select Committee—of which I am talking principally of my own, the Select Committee on Science and Technology—to pull together and generally form a common view. That is the right format for the debate that we are about to have.

The Science and Technology Committee has undertaken a major study into the scientific advisory system—the quality of scientific advice that is given to the Government, how the Government use that advice and the consequences of that advice on their policies and legislation. We undertook a series of case studies, the first of which was on genetically modified foods. The second case study examined mobile telephones, to which I shall refer in a moment. We decided to publish our reports separately as we thought that each of them was topical and relevant in its own right. Today when we debate genetically modified foods I shall speak from the point of view of the Science and Technology Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington will put the view of the Environmental Audit Committee. I shall take a broad-brush approach to the matter, because members of my Select Committee will speak on specific topics. In that way we hope to minimise the risk of our speeches overlapping and maximise on the number of hon. Members who can speak.

I want to deal with four points. First , members of the Select Committee agree that science must be allowed to progress. Indeed, scientific development must be encouraged. Genetically modified foods can be used as an example of the controversy that science can bring about. However, when that controversy is analysed properly and considered, it can be seen that science must not be stopped by some doubters and heretics. It must be allowed to progress as it has done over the centuries.

Scientists have a strong responsibility to ensure that they do not transgress moral or proper boundaries, and I wish to draw some parallels between genetically modified foods and the use of the human embryo and cloning. We accept that there is a need for responsibility and that there are boundaries beyond which we should not go. Experiments, especially in relation to genetically modified foods, must be contained and I am sure that the containment of those experiments for environmental reasons will be raised later in the debate by members of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Secondly, we recommended in our report that there must be openness with the public especially customers and users, about all genetically modified experiments. I must emphasise, however, that when the one genetically modified product was on the market—tomato paste made from genetically modified tomatoes—it was labelled clearly and became a fast seller, outselling by far conventional tomato paste. Consumers considered it to be better in flavour and texture than conventional tomato paste. Sales continued until scare stories began and consumers were persuaded not to use the product.

Thirdly, there must be honesty from scientists who are working in the genetically modified area. They must ensure before they publish their findings that they are reviewed by their peers and that their experiments are repeatable. I say that because genetically modified foods have been set back by the work of Dr. Pusztai, whose experiments have not been replicated and have not received peer approval. Politicians must be honest, too. It is not honest of them to describe genetically modified foods as "Frankenstein foods"; that is emotive and non-scientific. It does not give much honour to scientists to use the expression and is of no help to science and its consequences. While on the subject of honesty, I must mention newspaper reporting. On 26 April 1999, the *Daily Mail* carried a massive scare headline, "Scientists warn of GM crops link to meningitis". Such a link is tenuous, if it exists at all. It will be dealt with by the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard).

My fourth point concerns the morality of the experiments and their consequences. More important still is the morality of having knowledge that is vital to human beings, but not using it. For example, what would have happened 150 years ago if we had had the technology that we have now, whereby we put genes from snowdrops into potatoes to stop them rotting in the ground? If we had known that, by doing that, we could stop potato famine in Ireland, would it have been right to say that experimentation should not be done, or to say that it should be done, thereby preventing deaths and misery?

If we know that we can develop crops that will give two or three yields a year rather than one, are we right, knowing that there is a shortage of food and many mouths to feed in Asia, not to pursue such experiments? If we can develop crops that will grow on one half or one quarter of the amount of water that they currently require, do we have the moral right not to develop such crops, bearing in mind the famine and starvation in the horn of Africa? Morality has two sides: that of

[Dr. Michael Clark]

experimentation and that of not experimenting. Do we have the right to withhold the developed world's science from the under-developed world's population?

The objections to genetically modified foods arise mainly because people in this country do not perceive the benefits of such foods. I referred earlier to the mobile phone report. It is said that the transmitters pose risks and that there are even risks from the hand-held sets which, after all, are transmitters as well as receivers. We could not show or prove any hazards. But no one complains about mobile telephones, because they are of massive benefit to the population. I nearly said genetically modified telephones and perhaps that is what I should have said. People in this country object to genetically modified foods because they cannot see the benefit.

Before concluding, I want to refer to the Government's response to our report. I am pleased to say that they welcomed and received our report very well. They state:

"The Government agrees that GM technology holds out the propsect of important quality of life and economic benefits that we do not want to see lost to the UK. It is a technology that can be applied in a range of areas—agriculture and food production, medicines and diagnostics, manufacturing process and environmental clean-up but these benefits will only be worthwhile if they are consistent with our paramount concern for public health and the environment."

Paragraph 7 of the Government's response states:

"In particular, we believe that scientific data must be subjected to the necessary peer review by the scientific community before it is made public. Peer review is the key safeguard of quality and reliability when new scientific data is produced. Without this quality control, not only specific results, but science and its practitioners risk being brought into disrepute."

Finally, paragraph 2, the shortest one of all, states:

"We agree with the Committee's conclusion that 'GM technology has the potential to deliver significant benefits to the UK through its application to agriculture and food both in terms of improving the quality of the food we eat and in economic terms'."

The first half of the last century was the era of the internal combustion engine, which led to road and air transport. The second half of the last century was dominated by electronics, computers and information technology, which gave us the ability to solve high labour-intensive problems, such as the genome project. I believe that the first half of this century will be the age of biotechnology, when we learn to combat, prevent, cure or even eliminate many diseases. The United Kingdom has a significant contribution to make. There are financial and economic benefits to the UK from genetic modification and biotechnology. There are social, welfare and health benefits, as well. The widely despised GM maize may well come to be seen as the seed-corn of the 21st century, and the controversy associated with it will pale into insignificance compared with the many benefits that are likely to accrue. nb I am delighted to have had the opportunity to initiate this debate.

2.43 pm

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): It is appropriate that we are discussing genetically modified organisms today because it was about a year ago when they began to hit the headlines in a very serious way. I am saying genetically modified organisms deliberately—[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Someone has an electronic device. Will he or she deal with it immediately? The rules on the matter apply just as much in this Chamber as they do in the main Chamber of the House.

Mr. Horam: I say deliberately genetically modified organisms, which does not yet include genetically modified phones—regrettably, in view of what has just happened.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Terminator gene.

Mr. Horam: I am indebted to the hon. Gentleman—a terminator gene might be very welcome indeed.

About a year ago, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition raised eyebrows during Prime Minister's Question Time by introducing the subject of GMOs. I remember that the Lobby correspondents and parliamentary sketch writers were somewhat amazed at how such a brilliant man as my right hon. Friend, who is so excellent during Prime Minister's Question Time, could have made such a serious mistake. What were GMOs and why was he introducing such a trivial topic at such an important time? There was some puzzlement in the Press Gallery, but my right hon. Friend's finger was right on the button. They were and remain a matter of considerable concern to the public. I remember the Prime Minister's bewildered reaction. He almost began say that biotechnology was a good modern industry, and to ask what the fuss was about. The right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), who was the Cabinet enforcer at the time, followed up rather more aggressively by saying that GMOs involved the biotechnology industry, in which we had invested a great deal and on which Britain was the leader, so he could not understand why everyone was complaining. The Government had been caught off balance by the public concern about the issue, and they remained so for some time.

We then began to notice—certainly the Environmental Audit Committee did—that there was another voice in the debate, not a million miles away from the Minister for the Environment, whom I am glad to see here today. It became apparent that there were two voices in the Government, separated by a chasm. They presented themselves to my Select Committee. The right hon. Member for Copeland gave evidence first and was clearly sticking to the remit of the biotechnology industry, whether it be good or bad. The Minister for the Environment came along, in the company of his right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), who at the time was a Minister of State in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and it became clear that there was a certain discordance.

The Environmental Audit Committee made some sensible suggestions. First, we suggested that there should be an overarching advisory committee to consider not only the science of the issue, but ethical and environmental questions, so that we would get a clear, strategic picture of the position. Secondly, we suggested that we should not proceed from field trials of GMOs to commercial plantings until everyone was fully satisfied that the results were satisfactory and could be released to commercial use.

Since then, the Government have described what I call a gentle parabolic curve towards the position adopted by my Committee; I am very glad of that. The announcement late last year that there would be two strategic commissions considering these matters—one concentrating on health issues and the other on the environment—is extremely welcome. However, there is still some way to go—as there always is.

I have some questions for the Minister and I want to make some points about what needs to be done. First, I want to raise the issue of handling the press—a point that was made strongly by my hon. Friend the Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee. In our report we call for an improved information strategy to address what was acknowledged by the Minister to be media hysteria on the issue. I do not mean a Charlie Whelan performance, with a pint of beer in one hand and a mobile phone in the other, outside the Red Lion, bellowing in blue language to a poor old hack that he had not understood the import of the article, and that what the Prime Minister said was that he would not enter the euro this year, even though he had said that he would in the article. I do not mean that sort of a spin-doctoring performance. I am sure that the Minister for the Environment has been around for far too long to stoop to such new Labour tactics. Does he even agree with such tactics? I am sure that he does not.

In the run-up to further problems with the media, the Government should have a clear view of the risk involved. There are questions of risk, whether we are talking about bovine spongiform encephalopathy, GMOs or whatever. The Government should say how far they are prepared to go with public health, the environment and so on, and begin to educate the press—and the public—on the serious issues. They should set a framework in which future controversy can be contained.

I have not heard a clear Government statement of the benefits of biotechnology. I have read a lot from Sir Robert May, the chief scientific officer on the subject. He has clearly stated his view, but we have not had a clear Government statement. We noted in our report that Baroness Young said that it was her

"personal view that, if public confidence in the Government's monitoring of genetic modification is to be rebuilt, it is a task for concerted effort by Government over five to 10 years."

That is the scale of the task that we have to tackle through an informed strategy, and I should like the Minister to tell us what is being done in that direction. I see very little, but he will agree that it is an important issue.

Why are the Government not prepared to make a significant effort to push science in the direction of greater sustainability? My hon. Friend the Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee clearly stated that science and technology have a role in tackling the big environmental problems that the world faces. I, too, believe that they have a role, which is why I support experimentation. For example, the internal combustion engine has been much improved during the last decade or so; we have been able to cut pollution with new technology.

My hon. Friend and I also believe that world climate changes may cause problems in feeding the world population and that GMO technology may help us deal with it. However, the science must be properly handled. Monsanto is a chemicals company, and its prime short-term aim is, obviously, to maximise its sale of chemicals—herbicides, pesticides and so on. It is unlikely to devote a sizeable effort to reducing the need for pesticides or producing crops that need less water, which is certainly something that we may need in future. I know from my time as Minister with responsibility for science in the previous Government that the facilities available to the Government to push science in the right direction are considerable. The science Minister has his own budget and can set his own spending priorities, although individual spending decisions are taken by academics in the various research councils. Technology foresight allows agreement to be achieved between industry, academia and the Government on the way forward and what is practical.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has its own science budget, and public funding of science is available to push science in the right direction, yet the right hon. Member for Perry Barr, then Minister for Food Safety, stated openly to our Committee that it was for the biotechnology industry to take science forward—a hands-off, free-trade approach. I am surprised that a Government even as right-wing as today's are prepared to go quite so far in the direction of Adam Smith that they want to let all the flowers bloom and not interfere. The right hon. Gentleman spoke emphatically on behalf of the Ministry, but even the strategic commission that the Government have set up makes no mention of the need to encourage sustainable agriculture. Surely, that is an essential part of a proper, overarching view of what we should be doing.

It is not that the Government refuse to push science in the right direction in other areas. For instance, combined heat and power and renewable energy are exempted from the climate change levy—the non-fossil fuel levy, first imposed by the previous Government. An attempt is clearly being made to arrive at solutions using other energy sources that are environmentally sensible as well as being good science and good commerce. It is a pity that the Government have not grasped that. I hope that the Minister will tell us today what else has been done during the past 12 months and whether more is proposed. That is a fundamental issue.

Finally, the Government are relying heavily on field trials to determine their future policy and to restore public confidence. What are they doing to ensure that those findings are not rubbished by the other side arguing that the trials have not been properly conducted? I understand that the framework for the trials was agreed with the supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops—SCIMAC—but that is an industry body. The Government endorsed that and published a code of practice, but disagreements are already surfacing. The Government say that the rules

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are tough, but Friends of the Earth say that they are feeble, unworkable and unenforceable. The Government are unlikely ever to get the agreement of Friends of the Earth on that matter—I fully accept their difficulty—but the Government could at least have consulted English Nature, to gain an element of environmentalist support for the code of practice. Why has that not been done? Why is the Minister confident that, when we come to the end of the experiment in 2002 or 2003, it will not be rubbished by those who feel that they have played no part in drawing up the ground rules for the experiments?

I have no doubt that the Government's second thoughts at the beginning of last year were better than their first thoughts. They have made progress. The danger is that, in the near future, we shall once again hit severe controversy and further headlines of the sort that contribute nothing to a rational debate. In that sense, the contribution that biotechnology can make to sustainable development will be set back.

2.55 pm

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): First, I congratulate both Select Committees on their reports, and on the opportunity that we have to debate them. I also congratulate the Government on their response to that parliamentary scrutiny, public concerns and pressure from the numerous non-governmental organisations on these issues. We have been assured that the three new responsible bodies—the Food Standards Agency, the Human Genetics Commission and the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission—will engage stakeholders and the public in debate. Their work will be crucial. I look forward with great interest to finding out when their work is to start. I am sure that many questions will be asked and I hope that we can all participate.

In their response to the reports, the Government reiterated their commitment to consumer choice—which is to be achieved primarily through labelling. They enthusiastically welcomed the European Union commitment to a 1 per cent. threshold, but many consumers were extremely disappointed. Retailers are now able to achieve a 0.1 per cent. threshold and, given that technical feasibility, I hope that the Government will continue to press for a threshold as close to zero as possible. I hope also that they will keep to their commitment for an early review.

I applaud Tesco's recent announcement that it does not wish its suppliers to grow crops in areas that may have been contaminated by crop trials. That may be a marketing ploy, but it is also entirely logical for those who want to offer proper consumer choice.

In response to the findings on the regulatory and advisory systems, the Government repeated their assurance that human health and the protection of the environment were their prime concern. We all endorse that. However, Ministers must understand the reason for our continuing concern—the fact that monitoring is post-release. Millions of people have already eaten GMOs, and they continue to do so. The field trials are set in a living environment, which is why the application of the precautionary principle, as advocated by the Environmental Audit Committee, is so crucial. It is why so many NGOs and their parliamentary supporters, including me, have argued for a five-year freeze. That would mean no new imports of GMO foods or crops, no new registrations of GM seeds, no patenting of genetic resources and, of course, no commerical growing in Britain.

Although field trials are important in helping us to reach decisions, they answer only some of the questions. I have no confidence in the good intentions of the companies that brought those new foods to market without public consent, without labelling. In many ways they were scientifically irresponsible. The Government say in their response that they will not allow commercial planting of GM crops until they are absolutely satisfied that there are "no unacceptable effects". That would lead some to ask what would be acceptable effects of GMOs on the environment and human health. The Chairman of the Science and Technology Committee, the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark), spoke earlier about the morality of scientists in relation to GM foods. In my view, there was no morality in companies using antibiotic markers in their gene transfers, when we all know that the world is fighting desperately to secure and protect the use of antibiotics in human health and when, even in our own country, hospitals are fighting against superbugs.

For all those reasons, many of us will continue to be extremely concerned, even those of us who have some scientific knowledge and who are generally supportive of science and keen that it should be allowed to progress. Science cannot be allowed to progress at any price, and that is what our debate is about. The hon. Member for Rayleigh also mentioned the possibility that transferring snowdrop lectin to potatoes could have prevented the potato famine—a possibility that requires a huge jump of imagination and has nothing to do with science. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that research was recently undertaken in Dundee on snowdrop lectin, which found that it combines with the human white blood cell? That could be of enormous significance in terms of the immune system. We do not know anything further than the results of that initial research, but it has been peer-reviewed and is important.

Dr. Michael Clark: I should like to make a correction. I did not say that the transfer of snowdrop lectin would have prevented the potato famine. I asked whether, if we had known that it could have done, we would have been morally right 150 years ago to prevent such an experiment from taking place. I do not know whether it would have prevented the famine—I presented it as an example of an "if".

Joan Ruddock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that correction. However we know that there is research demonstrating that there is real reason for concern; thus the assumption that the kind of gene transfer that has already taken place constitutes definitive progress is not yet proven. That is the case that I am making.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Had a foodstuff containing lectin, about which there is such doubt, been marketed for consumption, my hon. Friend would be justified in complaining that the regulatory system was completely awry. However, that is not the

case and she should not imply that it is. Would she deny the opportunity of developing genetically modified crops—such as bananas—that can contain cholera vaccine or crops that are modified to have high levels of vitamin A, which could save many people in developing countries from going blind?

Joan Ruddock: My hon. Friend suggests that those are realities, but as yet they are all just experiments in laboratories and it is quite unscientific to suggest that we can now produce those developments without risk. The research into their adverse effects has not been carried out. The series of laboratory experiments conducted on insect-tolerant Bt maize, for example, have demonstrated that the insecticide produced by that plant as a result of genetic engineering is leaking into the soil. That was unknown and unresearched prior to the crop being grown. My hon. Friend does no justice to her case by suggesting that those developments are a reality.

In answer to my hon. Friend's question, such developments are possible; I would not deny that. However, there is no reason to presume that they will come to the fore and be positive advances in treating people with disease or in solving the food problems of developing countries. The food problems in developing countries are due not to shortage of food, but to problems with distribution and with control and ownership of land.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Joan Ruddock: I know that many hon. Members want to speak and I wanted to be brief; I am not the presenter of either of the reports. I am more than willing to give way to the hon. Members who have just risen, but I ask other hon. Members not to complain if I then take more time than I might otherwise have done.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Will my hon. Friend add to her list of the major causes of food shortage in the third world loss in storage and loss from pests? Those problems might be resolved in many ways, one of which is genetic modification of crops.

Joan Ruddock: I am perfectly happy with that intervention and I will take the next one.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): In discussions that I was fortunate enough to have with some Indian farmers at the beginning of last year, they pointed out that they have a real concern about blindness, but that there are other possible solutions to that problem. One of the most significant of those would be simply to stop spraying crops in the fields with pesticides, which would be extremely helpful. Wonder solutions are not the same as sustainable solutions. In regard to blights, the agenda being set in the developing world is much more about using plant diversity to deal with infestation management systems, than about the pursuit of monocultures, which inevitably produce their own new blights.

Joan Ruddock: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I would add that it is paternalistic to think that we in the west should decide that people in developing countries should have vitamin A-enhanced rice. I think that people in developing countries would like more diversity in their diet and I am opposed to a deliberately engineered mono-diet.

The Government have said, quite rightly, that the farm trials results have to be made available before any decision is taken on unrestricted planting. In one of their responses, they laid out details of the consents that are required—that there has to be approval of the herbicide to be used in herbicide-tolerant crops, that the seeds have to be entered on the seed register and that there has to be Europewide marketing consent.

I found it difficult to follow the responses to the two different reports, so I wish to put a question to the Minister. In response to the Environmental Audit Committee, the Government said, in reference to oilseed rape that is under trial, that if a European marketing consent were granted,

"the harvested produce will be used within identity preserved channels".

Can the Minister clarify what that means? As I understand it, there is no requirement to label produce, such as milk or meat, that comes from animals fed—I presume that it would be fed to them—on such crops. Will there be a change in the labelling regime to take account of that?

I also ask my right hon. Friend to clarify the Government's explanation in that response for the use of AgrEvo's herbicide-tolerant maize, which already has European marketing consent. The Government's argument seems to imply that further consents could be given during the period of the crop trials. Will the Government permit the seeds of herbicide-tolerant maize to be registered during the period of crop trials? Will the Government approve the herbicides that would be used if it were to be grown commercially? Will that be done in advance of the completion of the trials? If so, not only will it involve public expense, but it would seem to go against the precautionary principle to which the Government adhere. During crop trials, the Government should vote against marketing consent for crops involved in the trials that do not already have such consent, as they have the power to do in the European Union. They should stop the progression of crops through seed regulation, and should not approve any of the pesticides involved.

In their responses, the Government, rightly, deal with all the details of containment, regulation, testing and labelling, subjects about which the hon. Member for Rayleigh has spoken. However, the Government must remember that we are locked into that process only because biotech companies went to the marketplace with untried and untested products.

Throughout Europe, Governments are trying extemely hard to catch up with the biotechnology industry. In focusing on doing that, it becomes difficult to see the bigger picture, but a picture there is. Although support from the public and business for genetic engineering in pharmaceuticals and medicines in the wider sense continues, rightly, to thrive, the opposite is true for GM food and crops. Although demand and markets for organic produce greatly outstrip supply in

[Joan Ruddock]

the UK, there is virtually no market for genetic modification of food. Furthermore, we have no food shortage in Europe; on the contrary, we have an embarrassing surplus. I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister and hon. Members to keep that bigger picture in mind as they deliberate.

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): I am listening with great interest to my hon. Friend. Does she oppose genetically modified food per se? If not, what information would satisfy her anxieties about the safety of such products that would subsequently allow her to endorse their use wherever it might be most beneficial?

Joan Ruddock: I do not oppose genetic engineering per se, but, as I have already made clear, many issues are not being dealt with and many fundamental experiments are not being carried out. As my hon. Friend has raised the subject, I take the opportunity to ask my right hon. Friend the Minister again what progress has been made in devising a means to monitor human health. At present we have no means of monitoring the consequences for human health of eating genetically modified food.

Much work remains to be done. Because I want to progress, I shall not go into further detail, but I assure my hon. Friend that many environmental aspects have not yet been resolved. Comparisons should be made in terms of sustainable agriculture and biodiversity between the effects of GM crops and those of conventionally grown non-GM crops and organic crops. The simplest way to reduce the rate of decline in biodiversity is to grow organic, rather than GM or non-GM, conventional crops. No proof has yet been provided that GM crops will give us what we require for sustainable agriculture. For those many reasons, I continue to worry about GM crops.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Following on from the previous intervention, does my hon. Friend agree that the difficulty in the debate over the past two years—[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. An electronic device seems to be operating. If the hon. Member responsible does not know how to switch it off, he should remove either the batteries or the device.

Mr. Chaytor: The problem is that anxiety about the effects of GM food has seemed incompatible with support for biotechnology as a key science of the coming century. We need to shift the paradigm slightly so that it can be perfectly reconcilable to support biotechnology in principle and appreciate its potential value while accepting that the precautionary principle must underlie the development of GM food, as with other biotechnologies.

Does my hon. Friend further agree that next week's conference in Montreal to negotiate the biosafety protocol is a key moment whereat the precautionary principle can be firmly embedded in international agreements? It could be the first international environment agreement of the new millennium, and I hope that she and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment will refer to it.

Joan Ruddock: Sometimes I explain the problem by saying that if something goes wrong when we are taking pills, we can stop, but if something goes wrong with food, we may not know how to stop. A big divide exists between the use of genetic engineering in contained systems, as in the pharmaceutical industry, and the release of GMOs into the environment and the consequences of the unlabelled and unregulated distribution of crops, seeds and foods that has been taking place around the world.

The Government are pre-eminent in their attack on regulatory regimes and the means by which we attempt to make our environment and people safe; I pay great tribute to them for everything that they are doing. However, the same is not true of Governments around the world, which brings me to the biosafety protocol. In the history of disputes in which the environment has been set against trade, trade has always won. That must not happen in the case of GMOs. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister agrees with me on that, and that the Government opposed tying GMOs into the World Trade Organisation framework, which we applaud. I hope that he will go to Montreal and be robust in his defence of the right of all nations to say no to the import of GMOs. That right is necessary for our own protection, for our national interest and the environment and health of our people, and it should be available to every other nation, especially developing nations, which face the greatest threat in terms of loss of biodiversity and have the greatest anxieties about control by multinational companies of their agriculture. Thank you for your indulgence, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

3.18

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I, too, extend my gratitude to the two Select Committees that produced the reports. If I intimate that I prefer the conclusions of one or the other, that is not to denigrate either in terms of the work involved and the careful consideration of important issues. I welcome the Minister, who has been a beacon of common sense in this matter when others have been perhaps slightly over-enthusiastic in various ways. I am sure that we are all grateful to him for his work on the biosafety protocol, to which I shall return.

Genuine anxieties have been expressed to a much greater extent, not only in Parliament but by members of the public, as a realisation of what is involved has become more widespread. I am keen to consider this important aspect of biotechnology on the basis of facts rather than superstition. I simply do not believe that we need to declare that the sky is about to fall on our heads in order to prove a point that is based purely on science. As a sort of scientist—a bad one, a long time ago—I believe that I have at least some understanding of the framework of science. Perfectly sound arguments need to be adduced to the debate on the development of GMOs and biotechnology—arguments that do not rely on assertions that cannot be supported by evidence produced through scientific investigation. I do not take the view that GMOs are innately evil and, simply because of their derivation, must be resisted at all costs.

To do so would be to decry the entire history of breed improvement in agriculture, which would be nonsense. Nor do I suggest that we should put aside the potential benefits, which the hon. Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark) described. The technology is important, and Britain has an important stake in it. There are potential benefits to extending research in terms of medicine and agriculture.

The precautionary principle is the basis for addressing issues of concern, as several hon. Members have said. Tests must be applied to assure us that the novel processes, products and organisms pose no threat in terms of safety, health and especially the environment. The technology is revolutionary in many ways. Trans-species manipulation of genetic material has not been considered previously, as it does not naturally occur other than in a limited sense between feral populations of closely related species. Therefore, we are right to consider the matter with extreme care.

Let us consider possible problems and how to address them. If we are to take the subject of food safety seriously, we must distinguish between foods containing genetically manipulated material and foods derived from a genetically manipulated organism. They are not the same. A substance produced by a genetically modified organism could be chemically and physically identical to one produced by an organism that has not been manipulated, so it would be nonsense to suggest that there might be differentiation between them based on the organism from which they have been derived. That does not apply to the ingestion of genetic material that has been manipulated, which should be tested so that a high level of safety is demonstrable before it is presented to the general population.

I shall not pretend that genetically modified crops necessarily represent an enormous health risk. However we do not know what health risks some of the organisms will present in the long term. There may be short-term risks, especially to people with allergies because we risk introducing unusual allergens into food products that otherwise would not contain them. Tests must be done to satisfy us that that is not the case.

More importantly, we must give the public the right to choose what they ingest. We must allow them the right to take risks even though some would say that there are no risks. That can be achieved only by effective labelling, so that people know what they are being asked to buy, and, if it is realistic, proper segregation. We know already the history of soya in the United States and the extent to which there has been a mingling of supplies. People find it difficult to know whether they are eating genetically modified products.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I agree almost entirely with what the hon. Gentleman says. Does he agree that we hear much about managerialisation of Government? To some extent, that is the consumer reaction—it is democratising the consumption process. Nothing can be wrong with that if consumers have the choice and the right to be secure in the knowledge that what they eat will not do them harm.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is absolutely right. The watchword is "Trust the people". Doing so involves giving them adequate information on which to make an informed choice. I do not believe that such information is now in the public domain or that the public can make informed choices. They are not aware of what they eat. That applies to directly produced foods, but we must also bear in mind the feed given to livestock and the meat derived from it, so segregation is important.

The most obvious environmental aspect was alluded to by the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), who made an extremely helpful contribution. Non-contained experimentation and commercial planting of crops risk genetic contamination. Until we can be satisfied that surrounding flora and fauna are not being contaminated, we must be sure that such contamination would not cause adverse environmental effects.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Will the hon. Gentleman explain the difference on the subject between GM crops and ordinary conventional crops? Are the problems any different?

Mr. Heath: They might not be different. If a conventional crop is placed where it is not native and is surrounded by species to which it is not normally neighbour, risks apply. Trans-species genetic manipulation, especially from animals to plants, introduces an extreme element of risk. It is risk, not proven effect, but we must take it into account.

Genetically manipulated crops may offer an initial benefit, but produce changes to the growing regime used for the husbandry of the crop. We do not know yet whether there will be reduced or increased herbicide use, or whether there will be changes in crop rotation patterns. We know that such matters should be investigated and that we should have clear protocols for continuation.

Dr. Starkey: Would the hon. Gentleman explain why he suggests that there should be restrictions on genetically modified crops to control changes in agricultural practices? There is no such control on farmers who change to agricultural practices that might be detrimental to the environment, such as intensive agriculture.

Mr. Heath: The effects of intensive agriculture on the environment are self-evident and have not been to its advantage. There is no difference in kind between one adverse effect on the environment and another. I am simply postulating that herbicide-resistant crops would logically result in the application of herbicide to reduce weeds between the crops. Therefore, herbicide use would increase and you would effectively produce a monoculture surrounded by a desert. To me, that is not an advance in agricultural practice and is not environmentally beneficial. I accept that that can happen by other means and will be equally adverse. That is a subject on which you—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has introduced "you" a few times into the debate, none of them cloned so far as I know. When he addresses the Chamber, he should use the third person. By referring to "you", he is referring to me, and I have not used herbicide for years.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was using "you" in the impersonal sense of "one" rather than the personal sense. I have no knowledge of your agricultural or horticultural pursuits, so I would not wish to ascribe anything to you.

The third potential problem is the environmental, social and ethical problem, to which the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford referred: the potential effect on developing countries. Is it beneficial for those countries to have these new crop varieties, as may well be the case, or is it linking them inevitably into a trade position that is to their long-term social disadvantage and may be to the environmental disadvantage of their country? That is why we need to hold tests.

It is not sensible to say that there should be no tests. Without tests one cannot obtain the scientific evidence needed either to support or to refute the positions that I have advanced. I shall set aside the question of contained experiments for the moment because I have no problem with them; they are a sensible and useful way forward. What is needed before the okay is given to farm-scale trials to proceed is an absolutely rock-solid protocol. First, it should ensure credible results that are transferable to other situations; and, secondly, it should ensure that the trials themselves do not represent a danger either to the local environment or the health of the local population. I am not yet satisfied that such a protocol is in place.

There is some support for that position, as the Minister well knows, from those who are interested in environmental matters. Indeed, a report published today is of considerable importance. I hope that he has read that report and can respond to it. It looks at pollen dispersal patterns and the potential for hybridisation of a series of plants that are candidates for GM trials. It suggests that the current isolation zones are wholly inadequate to prevent both dispersal and inter-fertilisation with feral varieties, particularly oilseed rape, although sugar beet and maize also present genuine problems. If we have question marks about basic elements such as buffer zones, we need to go back to the drawing board to ensure that the design of these experiments is right before we have a massive increase in the number of farm trials held around the country.

There are several concerns about the Government's position. As I suggested earlier, I partially absolve the Minister for the Environment of responsibility for some of those, although in collective terms, of course, he has a responsibility. There has been a disregard in part for the precautionary principle espoused by the Government in what has happened to date. It is not acceptable simply to trust the experimental evidence produced by a company such as Monsanto on its own crops without having it corroborated by extensive research elsewhere.

We have not had a balanced debate in this country. The Government have acted as cheerleaders for this technology, but that is not what the public expect from them, nor is it founded in a sensible assessment of the pros and cons of the technology. The Government have not yet taken sufficient interest in the design of the trials to ensure that they provide that credible basis for future research. The moratorium that was eventually wrung out of the Government is voluntary and therefore has no real meaning. In fact, it is more likely to be sustained by commercial and public pressures than by anything the Government may choose to do. It is not based on the length of time needed to obtain credible scientific results that can be used to establish the safety of commercial planting.

We have the Government's basic dictum that no unrestricted cultivation of GM crops in Britain will be allowed. That is reassuring, but what does it say about restricted cultivation of GM crops in Britain? Will that go ahead and to what extent will crops be allowed to enter the food chain? The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford drew attention to AgrEvo maize, which has commercial marketing consents. Is it likely to be proposed for the national seed list? Is commercial use of AgrEvo maize in this country imminent? The labelling threshold is a welcome innovation, as far as it goes, but 1 per cent. is a high figure. Retailers are running far ahead of the Government and the industry in what they are prepared to do. We have the MAFF surveillance programme, which is looking not at the observance of segregation but at whether the claims can be justified at retail level. That seems a cock-eyed way of using the Government's resources to ensure safety.

I shall end by talking about the biosafety protocol. The meeting is coming up in Montreal on 28 January. Will the Minister attend it?

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Heath: I am glad about that. Without ministerial attendance and the political impetus that it can provide, the talks are unlikely to succeed. It is very important that we establish in those talks a realistic hierarchy between the biosafety protocol, the World Trade Organisation and other multilateral agreements. It is important that we establish the precautionary principle on an international as well as a national basis. It is important that we establish where liability lies if the technology at some point, somewhere in the globe, ends with a disaster of one kind or another. It is important that we establish the principle that developing countries should not be put at either short-term or long-term disadvantage by the interests of corporate America or anywhere else that wished to unload a technology that is to its commercial advantage but may not be to the environmental or social advantage of developing countries.

This has been a useful debate. We could explore other areas that are important in terms of biotechnology such as gene patenting and TRIPS, the trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights agreement, but it is more important to focus on key issues relating to GM crops. I hope that the Minister will not only give some reassurance today, but tell us what the Government intend to do to ensure that the future development of this technology is based on safety, environmentalism and a precautionary principle to which we all, I hope, subscribe.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I call the next hon. Member to speak, I suggest that if hon. Members stick to around 10 minutes it will be possible to fit in everyone who has risen, but if they do not, it will not.

3.39 pm

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I shall do my best to be brief, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In welcoming the debate this afternoon, I want to try to put it into context. The issue of time and the short and long terms has been mentioned, and various hon. Members have suggested how this debate arose.

I should like to take the clock back to the days before the Westminster Hall Chamber and its horseshoe setting of seats—the purpose of which was to try to bring together the different parties so as to reach agreement on how we might proceed—and recall a meeting of the Globe group which I attended with colleagues just over a year ago. Many of us have felt a sense of time running out in relation to this debate. Some of us were fortunate to be able to attend a meeting of Globe UK at which we heard about what was taking place in Brazil. We were told that it was possible to supply non-GM soya, but that, because of the imminent planting season and the threat of an inability to differentiate between non-GM soya and GM soya, the choice could be taken from us. That would mean that United Kingdom retailers would no longer be able to find a source of non-GM soya.

Whatever views the hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam), who is sitting beside me and who chairs the Environmental Audit Committee, has about how the debate began, those events at the Globe meeting and my sense of my own biological clock ticking away as I approach my 50th birthday, made me want to do something to give the issues being debated in Parliament some resonance with people outside the House. By coincidence, I was fortunate to win an Adjournment debate which just happened to be on the same morning as the Leader of the Opposition asked a question about GM foods.

I want to consider what has taken place since I was fortunate enough to introduce that Adjournment debate on 20 February. At long last, discussion is out in the open, and the bottom line is that this is a debate about trade liberalisation, environmental protection and sustainable development. We heard a little while ago from the Chairman of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, who remarked that we are now in the age of biotechnology. I should like to think that we are in the age of sustainability and that we shall use our concern about the environment and our desire to implement the precautionary principle to underpin all that we do. I particularly welcome today's debate because I feel that the work of the two Select Committees has led to a much more informed public discussion in the period since the events of almost 12 months ago.

I am delighted that the Environmental Audit Committee agreed to hold its own brief inquiry, whose results we debate today. I also want to put on record my thanks to the staff of the offices that service Select Committees. I hope that in the coming months Select Committees will take a much more proactive role in influencing Government policies by bringing together Ministers and parliamentarians. Select Committees are an important means of doing that.

This collaborative debate, with colleagues who are members of the two Select Committees here in force along with other hon. Members, adds force to the debate about GMOs and where we go from here. There has already been a transformation, from the atmosphere of the combative question put to the Prime Minister on the afternoon of my Adjournment debate last year to the much more considered and constructive engagement between different parties in the House, and between those of us of differing environmental persuasions. My hope is that we will bring everyone together and underpin everything we do with a precautionary principle. That way all of us will be part of the solution. The discussion cannot be divided from the international sphere and the many varied developments that have occurred throughout the year.

As we discuss the first report of our own Science and Technology Committee, I remind colleagues that we engaged with a wide range of organisations that are now fully part of the on-going debate. I hope that they will be part of the solution, along with the Minister. The fact that there is now a Government information website on the subject of GM foods means that all who gave evidence to our inquiries are much better placed as equal partners to be part of the way forward. We consulted extensively organisations such as the Countryside Agency, the Environment Agency, the Environment Council, Greenpeace, the Institute of Biology, Friends of the Earth, the Institute of Directors, the National Farmers Union, the National Environmental Research Council, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and many more. That reveals the extent to which everyone is coming together in the debate.

The starting point of our inquiry was the evidence that the Government had inherited an issue about which previously there had been little joined-up thinking between Departments. On a couple of occasions during our inquiry, it was felt that there was still not as much joined-up thinking between the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions as we would have liked. However, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment has taken gigantic steps towards bringing about such thinking across Departments. He is to be congratulated on that.

At the outset, there was a reluctance to jeopardise trade at the expense of the precautionary principle, and to upset vested interests. There was also an acceptance that perhaps too great account had to be taken of focus groups whose members probably did not understand that environmental concerns resonate throughout the population of the UK. Our inquiry has helped to assemble a much wider and more informed public debate in which we can create an agenda and ensure that this overdue debate continues.

Our questions today are as pertinent as they were a year ago. Of all the issues that the Environmental Audit Committee discussed I want to concentrate most on international issues. I want to know what scope the UK and the EU have for policy initiatives and what prospects there are for multinational agreements and

[Ms Joan Walley]

the release of GMOs into the environment, with special reference to the World Trade Organisation and the general agreement on tariffs and trade's disciplines and obligations. One conclusion of the Environmental Audit Committee was:

"The explicit subordination of a multinational environmental agreement such as the Biosafety Protocol to agreements on international trade rules would be a deeply unfortunate precedent to set. We recommend that the Government must take every effort to revive the negotiations on the protocol and bring them to a satisfactory conclusion."

I was extremely pleased with that conclusion.

The Minister for the Environment has indicated that he will be the UK's delegate to the Montreal negotiations, which begin on 20 January; perhaps he will confirm that when he replies to the debate. I should be grateful if he would also tell the House of the latest position on the biosafety protocol, bearing in mind the debacle that occurred during the EU's negotiations in Seattle and the failed talks in Cartagena before that. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his work in rescuing something of the situation in Seattle. I understand that the EU's Environment Commissioner paid no regard whatever to the previous consensus among other European representatives there.

Can the Minister tell the House who else will attend the biosafety protocol meeting on 20 January? Will he also confirm that it will be a genuine opportunity to pre-empt the implementation of any previous decision of the WTO? We need to be told what steps are being taken to prevent a repeat of the events in Seattle. We certainly cannot have the EC trade commissioner, Pascal Lamy, appeasing the United States of America by proposing a WTO biotechnology working group. Fundamental to today's debate is the need for a United Nations protocol—a need to prevent at all costs WTO dominance of multilateral environmental agreements. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), I want this to be the first multilateral environmental agreement of the new millennium.

The proposed biosafety protocol, if agreed, would allow national Governments to regulate trade in GMOs, to restrict trade in them on environmental health grounds and to set rules for liability and labelling. It would protect the interests of consumers and primary food producers, and set limits to the activities of multinational biotech companies. Today's debate comes at exactly the right time. It will set the scene and give added strength to the Minister in Montreal. Our Government should insist on the agreement, so that people all over the world can have the right to say no to GMOs. There is growing support worldwide for that fundamental right. Public opinion is better informed than ever, especially as a result of the internet. In our global society there is greater awareness than ever before.

The other main issue is the Select Committee's recommendations on labelling. To recap, we predicted an ever-growing demand for information about the food that we eat—both its constituent ingredients and the wider impact of the processes by which it is produced. Labelling for process is a valuable goal and we urged the Government to achieve it. Organisations such as Greenpeace rightly reminded us that GM crops, in the form of animal feed, are getting into the food chain through the back door. Despite a proposed EU regulation for labelling on animal feed, there is still no requirement to label feed or the food products of animals fed on GM crops.

The Government have responded to the Select Committee recommendations, but I would welcome confirmation that they will continue to press the EC for rules on GM-free labelling and for proposals on the labelling of animal feed. That has been on the table since 1996. I am uneasy about this sentence in the Government's response:

"Whilst there is a trend amongst some groups to seek more information about the food they eat, we must also recognise that there are practical constraints to the level of detail that can be included on food labels without detracting from important safety or nutritional information."

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): Does my hon. Friend have any evidence of the harmful consequences of animal feed products being brought into the food chain? Proteins are broken down inside animals to individual amino acids and then reconstituted for the food that we imbibe ourselves. What evidence does my hon. Friend have that that process harms the human race?

Ms Walley: I do not have any such evidence. However, in common with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock), I want to ensure that all risk assessment is under way, so that new processes can be investigated on a step-by-step basis. That should not be pre-empted because of a failure to synchronise the right precautions and have them in place at the right time. We are being rushed into production without having had the necessary step-by-step research and review.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: I am listening with interest to my hon. Friend, but I remind her of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon). To be satisified that no risk is associated with GM food, she will need to understand the potential risks of every aspect of GM food's relationships to other bodies or lives. Does she believe that science today is advanced enough to provide that understanding? If not, what sort of information will make her confident that, as far as can be determined, no safety implications are associated with the digestion of GM foods or their subsequent realisation through animal feed stock?

Ms Walley: The important point is that we are dealing simultaneously with food safety and environmental diversity. During the Select Committee inquiry, we explored in detail—with English Nature and Baroness Young—some of the wider environmental issues. We are not talking solely about the implications of—

3.56 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.11 pm

On resuming—

Ms Walley: In response to the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas),

who has not had chance to return from voting in the Division, I want to make the point that we must be sure that we are not dealing with irreversible actions. We must consider that, as with BSE, we do not know about incubation periods. We must not let a genie out of a bottle that we cannot put back again. That is why I am convinced that we must proceed on a step-by-step, sure and steadfast basis. We should take precautions, rather than have to worry when it is too late, as with BSE.

I welcome paragraph 35 of the Science and Technology Committee report, which reinforces the need for regulations to include requirements for animal feed and meat products. I hope that we will make good progress and, if possible, place a European agreement on the statute book. If necessary, we should pre-empt action in Europe by ensuring that we take the lead.

The food industry and retailers have already taken action. Only last month, the United Kingdom's largest retailer, Tesco, announced that its target was the complete eliminaton of GM ingredients from animal feed, to be achieved using forms of segregated non-GM soya from Brazil. Consumer-led demand can bring about changes in retailing, which can make a world of difference.

I remind everyone of the interdependence of all that we do. I end as I began—with Brazil. After the Adjournment debate that I initiated last January, I and other parliamentarians in the Globe group had the privilege of meeting a delegation from the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, led by Mr. Hoffman, who is its Secretary of Agriculture. The aim of that visit to Europe was to assess the demand for GM produce and to protect further the democratic development option, in which the state and its citizens protect their sovereignty over their own agricultural sector and food supply systems.

It is important that Brazil has, so far, maintained a non-GM policy because of a federal court ruling that bans the commercial planting of GM crops until a full environmental impact study has been conducted. Again, full environmental impact studies and the time to produce proper results are crucial.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Will my hon. Friend explain why she is calling for proper environmental impact assessments while expressing reservations about farm trials and talking about the need for a moratorium on such trials in this country?

Ms Walley: I support the five-year moratorium on commercial planting, but it is important that research is done to find out how to proceed with certainty.

We have seen a victory for consumer choice in the United Kingdom. The refusal of the United States agriculture business to segregate GM crops meant that they were, in effect, being force-fed to consumers. Maintaining Brazil as a non-GM source has allowed the food industry to fulfil its wishes, and those of its customers, to have non-GM food.

In urging the Government to press ahead with implementing our recommendations, I shall end with the statement made on 29 December by the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. He called for an agreement at talks in Montreal to send the world a strong message on biosafety and regulating the movement of living modified organisms. Success in those negotiations would send a strong and timely signal to the international community that environmental concerns can be satisfied without creating new obstacles to free trade. I hope that today's debate will reinforce Kofi Annan's message. I look forward to the response of my right hon. Friend the Minister, who has done so much already to ensure that we have a proper and informed public debate on the subject.

4.16 pm

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): In this debate it is appropriate to say that, before being elected to the House, I was group research and development manager with Zeneca and so associated with major research development programmes exploring and applying biotechnology.

Genetic modification and biotechnology are not new. For thousands of years, people have been crossbreeding plants to improve the growth, yield and survival of cultivated crops. Anyone visiting a dog show or going to the races sees the results of the selective breeding of animals over many years. Those processes involve trial and error and so are inevitably hit and miss. The revolution that is modern biotechnology began with the immense British achievement of Watson, Crick, Wilkin and Franklin: the discovery in the 1950s of the structure of DNA—the stuff of which genes are made. Genes are the governors of a plant or animal's development and determine characteristics, such as blue eyes, long legs, wide leaves or yellow flowers. It is amazing that many genes are common across all animals and across all plants, and that some are common to both plants and animals. For example, a gene that helps to fight fungal infection is common to scorpions, shellfish and radishes.

During the past 40 years, we have developed techniques to manipulate and transfer genes to achieve effects deliberately, without using the hit-and-miss techniques of plant and animal breeders. At the start, that meant that the time-honoured process of plant breeders could be speeded up, but modern techniques for genetic manipulation go much further than that. Effects can be achieved that could never have been produced by crossbreeding and creating hybrids. Essentially, genetic manipulation is like long division; it is a technique for achieving a particular result. You cannot generalise, as many commentators have done recently, saying that genetic modification is inherently unsafe, any more than you can say that long division is unsafe because it was used in the calculations that led to the atomic bomb.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It was only my maths teacher at primary school who said that my long division was unsafe at times.

Mr. Beard: I am talking about the generic quality of long division.

Even if it were proved that genetic modification for herbicide resistance was unsafe, it would not mean that it was unsafe when used, for example, to increase the yield of rice; nor would it necessarily be unsafe if a crop were manipulated to tolerate cold weather. Yet those are exactly the absurd generalisations that have become

[Mr. Beard]

common in the media following Dr. Pusztai's appearance on television in a "World in Action" programme on 10 August 1998. Dr. Pusztai essentially claimed that genetic modification was unsafe as a technique. That utterly false, irresponsible and discredited claim on television began the media hysteria that has understandably generated public anxiety and reaction against genetically modified food. Before that, there had been no reaction to clearly labelled GM tomatoes. In fact, they had been bought in preference to established varieties of tinned tomatoes.

Of course, there should be concern if such new technology is used to produce crops that are damaging to the environment or food that may be unsafe for the consumer. The public cannot know these things and the Government have a duty to act on their behalf to determine whether a particular genetically modified crop is an environmental or health hazard and, if so, to stop its commercialisation. That has been the recognised duty of Governments in the European Union and Britain for some years.

The Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes and the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment assess and prevent respectively health hazards and dangers to the environment from genetically modified crops. Both committees comprise some of the most eminent academics and experts in their relevant fields and both have the authority to demand that further tests be done if they are not satisfied on any point when a new genetically modified food is brought before them. It should be emphasised that, under that arrangement for advice to Ministers, there has not been a single case of genetically modified food causing ill health, and no genetically modified crops have yet been permitted to be grown commercially, so they have certainly not damaged the environment.

I am glad that the Select Committee on Science and Technology roundly condemned the unjust attacks that have been made on the public-spirited men and women on the two advisory committees who have served the community well. To promote the view that genetic modification in general should be banned, irrespective of any scientific evidence, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth unjustifiably and unscrupulously attacked the objectivity and competence of the committees and those who serve on them with the vehemence of fundamentalist cults. Now it appears that Greenpeace is ready to vandalise the very fields that will produce evidence on whether genetically modified trees damage the environment. That is not just an abandonment of legality; it is a demand to abandon science and rationality as a foundation of public policy.

The Select Committee made various suggestions for adapting and adjusting the current regulatory system, most of which the Government accept in their response to the report. The predominant need is to establish public confidence in the regulatory arrangements through far greater openness in the way in which the two advisory committees operate. However, that move will be nullified if individual scientists and the media continue to deal with the issue as they have done since Dr. Pusztai's television appearance.

Dr. Pusztai's experiments, on which he based his televised claims, were incomplete and some had not been carried out at all. His interpretation of his data was disputed within his own Rowett Institute and by an independent statistical analysis which was commissioned by Dr. Pusztai and presented to the Select Committee. Dr. Pusztai contradicted what he had said on "World in Action" when he gave public evidence to the Select Committee. None of his work had been reviewed by his peers. The Royal Society had Dr. Pusztai's work reviewed by six of the most eminent authorities in the field. They concluded that his work was

"flawed in many aspects of design, execution and analysis and that no conclusion should be drawn from it."

Despite all that, Dr. Pusztai's original assertions continued to be quoted on various television programmes and in the press as though they were firm and definite conclusions, giving rise to solemn pontificating and assertions that the Government were not doing enough.

Dr. Gibson: Is my hon. Friend aware that there have been attempts to repeat Dr. Pusztai's experiments, but that they have been unrepeatable?

Mr. Beard: No, I was not aware of that, but it lends force to the point that I was making.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): While we are involved in this character assassination of Dr. Pusztai, will my hon. Friend confirm that, in his evidence, Dr. Pusztai told us that his initial interview with "World in Action" was cleared by the Rowett Institute and that his work had now been published in *The Lancet*, having been peer-reviewed before publication?

Mr. Beard: It has certainly been published in *The Lancet* but, as *The Lancet* said, as a means of publicising it and in no way as an endorsement of the results.

Mr. Chaytor: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Beard: No, I will not give way again.

Such coverage was, and is, recklessly irresponsible journalism playing on justified anxiety arising from the BSE scandal.

Modern biotechnology springs from a great British achievement: the discovery of the structure of DNA. Many British scientists have built on that, giving Britain a world lead in science and making us second only to the USA in applying that knowledge through biotechnology. However, public hostility to genetic modification, even under the strict Government regulation that has now been whipped up, puts that position in jeopardy. As a country, we are again in grave danger of inspiring leaders of science but having to watch the USA and Japan reap the economic benefits. That is the context in which the Select Committee asked academia to ensure that scientific staff were able to respond effectively and competently to the media. In their response, the Government accepted that. Concerted action is needed throughout universities. It

would be appropriate for the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals to take the lead in recommending how that can best be achieved.

The Select Committe also recommended that media editors and reporters should establish a code of conduct for dealing with scientific information and that it should be endorsed by the Press Complaints Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission. The Government do not endorse that recommendation on the grounds that the newspaper industry's code of practice—as overseen by the Press Complaints Commission—the BBC charter and the Independent Television Commission's code of practice already require accuracy and impartiality. However, the Government seem uncharacteristically complacent, as none of those safeguards has had any effect over the past 18 months.

The inadequacy of the Press Complaints Commission is well illustrated by the Select Committee's own complaint about the way in which coverage of this issue has been handled. Perhaps the most blatant distortion of the facts was a *Daily Mail* headline, which has already been referred to, linking GM foods and meningitis. No evidence was presented in the text to justify the headline: like many of the *Daily Mail's* headlines on this issue, it was a deliberate scaremongering tactic without factual foundation. The Press Complaints Commission has filibustered and prevaricated over the complaint for months instead of objectively adjudicating as it should. Even if the complaint is now upheld, it is far too late for any rebutal to have an impact. If that is the way in which a complaint from a House of Commons Select Committee is handled, are we to expect the PCC to provide better redress to the scientific community at large?

There is no suggestion by the Select Committee of any limitation on either academic freedom or press freedom; both are essential to a healthy democratic society. However, there is a need for self-discipline by both academics and journalists to avoid abuse of those freedoms. The promotion of public debate on scientific issues is vital if Britain is to build on its immense scientific heritage and benefit fully from the opportunities that are being created. Britain cannot prosper with a public culture that is hostile to science. The past 18 months have shown that neither academia not the media are providing the conditions for that debate. If the Select Committee's mild proposals to create the right conditions are not accepted, it is incumbent on the Government to come up with an acceptable alternative approach. It is not, however, constructive to rely on a Press Complaints Commission of proven inadequacy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next speaker, I want to re-issue my warning about time. If speeches continue to be long, not all hon. Members will be able to contribute.

4.29 pm

Dr. Desmond Turner (Brighton, Kemptown): I shall try to keep within a more reasonable time frame, especially as many of the points that I want to make have already been covered.

We must debate the subject rationally: we have not yet achieved that. We are making progress and have gone beyond where we were a year ago, when, the debate was polarised between unhelpful commercial pressures and those who seemed to assert that genetic modification was morally and religiously indefensible witchcraft.

Monsanto made almost as great a contribution to the public unacceptability of genetically modified foods as did Dr. Pusztai and the way in which his work was used. I am quite glad to see the richly deserved negative effect on Monsanto's stock value—it is nice to see capitalists being hoist by their own petard. Monsanto was pressing the commercial exploitation of GM food technology in a country with no food deficiency—we have a surplus—on the ground of modifications with no human benefit. For food consumers, insect or herbicide resistance is neither here nor there. The company sought entirely commercial benefits of no benefit that the consumer could immediately appreciate. The public might have been more receptive had Monsanto tried to create rice strains that would produce vitamin A or crops that would survive in arid climates and so benefit the third world, but it did not do so. It simply sought profit and thought that, by an expensive advertising campaign, it could get the British public to buy its products. It had the opposite result and it is now virtually impossible to sell GM foods in this country—they have almost disappeared from supermarket shelves.

That result is not necessarily happy because it has set us back. Monsanto should have been more responsible; it got itself and other agri-merchants a bad name by trying to tie farmers to its products. Its use of suicide genes meant that, instead of being able to keep seeds to use the next year, as third-world farmers commonly do, farmers had to buy from the supplier more expensive seed and the products to go with it. It is no wonder that agri-business got itself a bad reputation and it fingers deservedly burnt.

I am afraid that Dr. Pusztai, and those who seized on his evidence, have also done us a great disservice. Dr. Pusztai's starting proposition was perfectly respectable. I do not think that any member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology would argue with the proposition that the development of animal models in which to look for toxic effects of GM foods, or any other food substance, is desirable. There was nothing wrong with that scheme.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Should not the public be pleased that there is Government funding for such research? The results have never been validated, but had they been such projects would never have been exploited.

Dr. Turner: I thank my hon. Friend. It must be remembered that the subject of Dr. Pusztai's experiments was not a modification being developed with a view to commercial exploitation but a modification for use as a test model. Nobody in his right mind would want to rush to market with a potato modified to produce a potent toxin. No sensible person would do that, but Dr. Pusztai was testing such a potato. His first experiments, which received all the publicity, did not even use the genetically modified potato. They used an ordinary potato laced—spiked—with the toxin. You would not expect rats to like that. In addition, the procedures and experiment design that Dr. Pusztai used

[Dr. Turner]

was so bad that all that you could legitimately deduce from his experiments is that potato alone is not an adequate diet for rats. You would say that of feeding human beings on potato alone.

Dr. Gibson: Chips are all right.

Dr. Turner: Well, they have a bit more to them.

The experiment was linked with the press hysteria and misrepresentation that has been referred to. The situation was not helped by the senior management at the Rowett Institute, who handled it badly. They took time to wake up to the fact that the Rowett, a Government-backed institution, had released factually untrue material. We must get away from that, and get down to real evidence for whatever we do in future.

Happily, we have not, so far, faced a real threat in this country because the foods licensed have not done any harm. There is not the remotest evidence of harm to consumers and there have been no crop releases. Campaigners for fixed moratoriums—of three or five years—are being simplistic. It would be much better to take the line of my right hon. Friend the Minister and say that there will be no commercial releases until we have sufficient information on individual crops. It does not matter if that takes three years, five years or longer. There should be no releases until we have the evidence. That is the only proper line to follow, and that is the line that the Science and Technology Committee would endorse.

We should do more to test products than has been done in the past.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): I am sorry to interrupt by hon. Friend, but will he explain what additional useful information can be obtained by commercial testing of GM crops in this country that cannot be obtained from tests carried out abroad?

Dr. Turner: The ecological circumstances are different. You cannot translate results from the growing of a field of maize in the United States to our own ecology because ours is much smaller and more diverse. Only about a third of the United States is under cultivation and those areas are separate from wildlife areas. The areas are mixed in the British countryside. You cannot extrapolate from American results to the British countryside. You must demonstrate the effects here. I think that many hon. Members will share that view.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: There have been an awful lot of "yous" this afternoon. The hon. Gentleman has got into the habit of using them.

Dr. Turner: I humbly beg your pardon, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall refrain from sheep farming in future.

I was about to say that I want the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes to go beyond the principle of substantial equivalence in assessing the safety of prospective foods, because that is a bit crude and inadequate. We do not want to allow "coulds" to remain, or to leave potential hazards uninvestigated. We should look at least for evidence from feeding trials, to ensure that no unsuspected toxic effects arise from manipulation. Manipulation is much more precise than hybridisation but it is not all that precise. Science cannot yet control exactly where on a chromosome a gene will be inserted. We cannot be 100 per cent. certain that the effect will be what was intended. We must take that into account and be sure.

I do not have a problem with the precautionary principle—depending on the limits that you set to it. If you were to take it to its logical extension you would test every food that we now eat, many of which are extremely toxic—for instance, if they are not cooked properly. You must be a little sensible and bear in mind that it is impossible to prove—[*Interruption.*] My apologies, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is absolutely impossible to prove a negative: one can only do one's best.

Future regulations perhaps need a little tweaking in the way I have set out, but we have a reasonable Committee structure, especially with the new Committees that have been established, and I have confidence in the Food Standards Agency's approach to the matter—and, from the environmental perspective, that of my right hon. Friend the Minister.

We owe it to the consumer, ourselves and British science—which we must not endanger, because biotechnology is our only real growth industry and it would be folly for the future of the British economy and British jobs to endanger it unnecessarily and on the basis of false accusations—to reach a properly rational position on genetic modification.

4.44 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I congratulate both Committees on the reports that have been presented, and particularly welcome the fact that we are able to consider them jointly. I also welcome my right hon. Friend the Minister and thank him, even before he has said anything, for the nod that he gave to confirm that he will attend the Montreal conference on biosafety. That is wonderful news for those of us who look for something more substantial than the working agenda that was allowed in Cartagena.

I endorse the report of the Environmental Audit Committee and I have substantial praise for the Science and Technology Committee. Perhaps I may gallop through in the time allowed and identify the matters where there is common cause among those of us who are campaigning for a five-year freeze and the right of consumer choice, and the matters that are open to substantial dispute. The call, in the Science and Technology Committee report, for a full audit trail of GM foods and crops, from seed to supermarket shelf, is welcome; so is the call to define thresholds because it is vital to separate GM from conventional crops. Also important is the call for the right of local discretion to be built into the framework of European rules. Perhaps most important is the demand that the precautionary principle should underpin our approach to a science that applies to medicine and agriculture. It will prove phenomenally helpful if we can also obtain amendments to directive 90/220 to ensure an assessment of the cumulative effect of GMOs and an extension of publicly funded research into their environmental impact. All

those developments would be as welcome to those who have been campaigning for a freeze as to the supporters of the biotechnology industry's claims.

Less happy is the lack of clarity about where thresholds should be set. The answer has already been provided outside the House and in the marketplace. I understand that Sir Paul McCartney has already taken the decision to move the whole of the Linda McCartney food range out of any contact with GM organisms. The company is setting a threshold of zero and can see no reason to accept any other. To accept any other is like suggesting that it is possible to be a little bit pregnant. The advice is that one should not be pregnant at all if one does not want to be. The public have the right to exercise the choice: something that is said to be GMO free should be exactly that.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Simpson: I will not, I am afraid, because I want to try to squeeze what I have to say into six minutes.

I am also pleased that many Japanese beer manufacturers have adopted such an attitude: to ensure that their products will be GMO free, they are buying huge acreages of land in the United States. We should not be afraid of setting a zero threshold.

It would have been a help if either or both of the Committees had been able to approach a little closer to the Genetically Modified Food and Producer Liability Bill, which I presented last year, and connect the issue with a direct responsibility: producer liability. I expect that to become one of the most important benchmarking elements by providing commercial linkage. It will produce clarity in the minds of those who say, "This is a wonderful, whizz-bang science and we should charge ahead with it," if they know that they will be financially liable for all consequential damage. I am keen to pursue that approach.

I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to have a second look at another issue. Before we decide that Codex is the legitimate body in which to invest new responsibilities, it is worth recognising that many of the criticisms of it by the sustainable farming and environment movements are based on its being dominated by commercial interests that have pushed for early and unrestricted release of GMOs into the environment. The structure of Codex may have to be tackled in much the same way that my right hon. Friend has addressed the credibility and independence of some of our scrutiny Committees.

It is wrong, however, to suggest that there must be a strengthening of the novel foods process. It is remarkable what such a scientific revolutionary process can do, but, as a Parliament, we assume wrongly that it cannot be dealt with under the existing regulatory regime. It is mistaken to describe a revolutionary scientific process as though it were a different form of cake decoration. We need new benchmarks against which to scrutinise the possibilities of the science and the consequential risks and damages that may be associated with it. It is not enough to refer to the absence of proof of damage: absence of proof is not proof of absence. It is important to recognise that it is our duty, as people who set the regulatory framework, to stick by the right to exercise precautionary principles and say, without being ashamed or apologetic, that claiming the right to buy time to put ourselves in a position to know more is an act of responsibility rather than a missed economic opportunity.

We have committed the dreadful error of allowing the commercialisation of biotechnology processes to drive the time agenda which says that, if we miss out now, the process will be gone for ever. The Science and Technology Committee was right when it said:

> "At the current rate at which food manufacturers are withdrawing GM ingredients or ingredients derived from GM sources from their products, there will be no market for GM food in this country."

The pressure is not to be on that bandwagon when it goes over the cliff. We must return to an issue that is more about sustainability and the defining of different scientific benchmarks.

Mention has been made of the ability to transform crops; the potato was taken as an example. Companies in the United States are producing genetically modified potatoes with Bt toxin built into them. Such crops produce their own insecticide; they do not need to be sprayed because it is as though insecticide factories are chugging away inside them. We can all buy crops, nutrients for the soil and pesticides from garden centres, but bottles of pesticides have no cooking instructions on their labels. I am concerned about health warnings. We need new scrutiny systems by which to assess genetically modified crops that would deal with the revolutionary change in the scientific base. I am not being anti-science, but the five-year freeze demand is part of the process of buying time for ourselves so that we can act responsibly on the basis of good science rather than poor science.

Some time during early February, we are hoping that Professor Terje Traavik from Tromso university will address a meeting at the House of Commons. He is one of the world's leading scientists and has studied horizontal gene transfer and its risk implications. I should be delighted if my right hon. Friend the Minister could find time in his diary to talk to Professor Traavik during his visit here. It is important that we are familiar with some of the implications and risks of horizontal gene transfer, the extent of which we are only now beginning to understand. That will be a way in which to reconnect the scrutiny process with the uncertainty agenda of the public.

At the end of February, I shall be talking to farmers in the United States about why the European public will refuse to buy their crops. Some of them are now questioning whether they want to grow them. Law firms in that country are initiating class actions for damages from biotechnology companies and I shall want to discuss with them how class actions for damages can be initiated in the United Kingdom. The issue of liability must connect with that of scientific scrutiny.

We know already that an agenda has been formed, without our permission, in the developing world about food sufficiency. It is important for both Select Committees to recognise that to a great extent that is not driven by a clamouring demand for access to genetically modified crops. Much of it is based on the desire to put on the global agenda, first the right to sustainability criteria and, secondly, the right to sufficiency criteria in terms of World Trade Organisation negotiations or what flows from them. Some of those criteria are

[Mr. Simpson]

reflected in the demands of the Indian Government that countries be allowed to produce for food sufficiency, rather than be made to leave their markets open either to short-term commercial exploitation to feed the west, or to the long-term transfer of the ownership of their biodiversity to corporate acquisition, which will also do them no favours other than bequeathing long-term gifts of even greater insufficiency and poverty. If my right hon. Friend the Minister intends to bring something to that agenda in Montreal, I hope that it will lead to the balancing of the opportunities that may exist in the science against the risks and rights of other people to determine their own sufficiency and sustainability agenda in future.

Colleagues have warned about the irresponsibility of those who are part of the freeze campaign, but I refer them back to the Asilomar declaration. In 1975, some of the pioneers in biotechnology—the scientists who did the ground-breaking work in that area—said, "We do not know enough about the downside." One of my footballing colleagues was part of that process, but those who did the ground-breaking work said then that there should be a moratorium on the commercialisation of biotechnology until more was known about the broader consequences for human and environmental health, and the impact on the ecosystems on which we all depend.

The moratorium, for which genetic scientists called, was undermined by the companies saying precisely what some hon. Members have said earlier—that unless such matters are pushed ahead, we shall be left behind. The pursuit of crude science for commercial gain, not necessarily for societal or environmental gain, has shifted the agenda to its current position. I am probably one of the greatest admirers of Monsanto because no organisation has helped to move the agenda away from biotechnology and back towards sustainability in the way that it has. I am not advancing an anti-science argument: I am trying to put the case for good science as opposed to poor or crude science. There may be huge potentials in biotechnology and they may be greater in relation to medicine than to agriculture.

A different agenda is opening up about how the world can feed itself sustainably. It is one of the most exciting parts of the broader political agenda of our time. The problem is that, politically, few of us have had the remotest connection with it. National Governments in the industrial world have been among the worst at understanding the new agenda. However, if we trust people just because they are scientists, we shall be judged harshly. We have had enough experience of the best-intentioned advice taking us down catastrophic paths in terms of human health, animal health and environmental damage.

The jury is out on biotechnology. It was not out on Tommy Archer. When he was charged with acts of vandalism about which we have been warned—pulling up GM crops—the jury said that it was a legitimate and socially responsible action in response to the risk of horizontal gene transfer into soil bacteria. Tommy Archer may be proved right and we may prove to have been well behind in understanding the balance between risk and opportunity. Our duty is to exercise a precautionary responsibility towards the people who elect us. We must not surrender them to short-term commercial exploitation and, perhaps, long-term catastrophic damage to human and environmental health. Buying the time to set down new benchmarks for scientific scrutiny may allow us to take the sensible decisions for which both Select Committees are calling.

5.1 pm

Dr. Brian Iddon (Bolton, South-East): There is no doubt that we have crossed the threshold of a second green revolution. Like all revolutions—scientific, political or otherwise—it is almost impossible for one individual to do anything about it, and it would be difficult for Governments to interfere in this exciting revolution.

I agree with the conclusion of the Environmental Audit Committee, that we should try to push the revolution in a direction that is good for all mankind. This revolution is unlike the first green revolution in that our constituents are much better informed than they have ever been, because of the internet, satellite systems and better education in the developed world. Electors are questioning the people they have elected more than ever before. There have been difficult circumstances, such as a series of food scares involving E. Coli, salmonella, listeria and, more recently, the much more sinister BSE crisis, which has not ended yet. It is no wonder the public are concerned. The media have been irresponsible and have generated a kind of hysteria.

I am much more concerned about genetic modification occurring naturally in micro-organisms, leading to new diseases that will be drug-resistant in future, than I am about controllable development of GMOs. All the problems that we have experienced have occurred in that way, apart from perhaps the prion.

People have talked about baselines against which we can measure progress, especially if the commerical production of GM crops and foods is allowed. In parallel, organic farming, which I welcome, is developing. I was an organic farmer in my youth. I had lettuces covered in aphids and cauliflowers in caterpillars—everyone is welcome to the organic food that I used to produce. I hope that we are not going back to those days. We also have farmers returning to integrated crop management systems. It will be very difficult to set a baseline for the development of any one of these three areas and measure them intelligently. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has published 150 sustainable development indicators, among which there are headline indicators, which is a welcome advance and will put us in a much better position to set baselines than ever before.

No one has mentioned civil liability for environmental damage. We must get a hold on that issue. Will liability lie with the companies that sell the products, the farmers who grow the crops, or the Government who licence the crops to be grown? Who will decide the framework of the legislation that might be forthcoming in future? Will it be single countries like Britain, or a combination of countries, such as the European Union, or will the matter be agreed at a global level? It is an important question which must be debated.

I feel sorry for the scientists who are involved in GM work. They have faced many difficult crises, some of which have been mentioned this afternoon. In any important development, we must weigh the risks against the benefits. I have studied seriously the benefits in food that could be gained from the development of GM crops. I have also tried to understand the risks. There is no doubt that there are risks, but if we push the development of GMOs in the right direction, using all Government pressure, the benefits will far outweigh the risks. GM foods are often sold on the basis that they taste better and last longer. I do not think that that is much of a selling point. It could be a bigger selling point if we developed GM foods with better nutritional properties. They could have a higher protein content and more vitamins.

There is a possibility of producing disease-resistant crops and decreasing the amount of pesticides used by farmers. That argument may have been oversold, but it is a possibility. We should not forget the lower energy demands that would be a consequence of that, because of lower production of chemicals and reduced transport costs, including crop-spraying costs. We can reduce soil tillage and protect good micro-organisms in the soil. There is the exciting possibility of increasing crop yields. The benefit that attracts me the most is the possibility of genetically modifying crops in such a way that, like leguminous crops, we can get them to fix their own nitrogen from the air. That would be a major single advance if it were possible. Consider the damage that nitrates in watercourses do.

In our Select Committee debates, we dealt mainly with crops for foodstuffs, but crops that produce chemicals are being developed, for example, as energy sources. The world will run out of oil and not too far into the future, chemists will need new resources for chemicals. We can produce non-food crops by GM technology. For example, it is possible to enhance the production of certain chemicals in oil-producing crops to produce drugs. I like the idea of growing new crops on highly contaminated land that has been almost written off because of earlier industrial experiences. We can grow crops to take up contaminants and store them so that they can be burned or destroyed in some other way. That is an exciting prospect.

Mention has been made of the hungry and starving in the world. One hundred million people are starving and a further 800 million, at least, are hungry. I accept that we are probably growing enough food worldwide to feed them, but there are serious political and economic problems of transporting the food from the European Union to starving people in Ethiopia. Genetic technology delivers the possibility of feeding them. The patents will run out one day. We can determine how long patents should last, but there is the possibility of handing to people crops that they can grow on dry soil, in frosty conditions and in adverse climatic conditions of all kinds. We are in the process of climate change, so we cannot ignore the possibility that some of us north of the tropical belts will begin to experience difficulties with crop production far into the future. There is an opportunity of handing to the people in all difficult parts of the world the possibility of growing crops for themselves where they live.

Hon. Members have mentioned marker genes. We may all be against the antibiotic-resistant marker genes, but it was one of the easiest changes to introduce. I agree with the Select Committees that it must be taken out, and the technology exists to do so. However, we need to put another marker gene in its place. I agree with other hon. Members that we need to trace every genetically modified foodstuff. From growing the grop to putting it on the plate, we need to trace it right through the food chain, and marker genes are absolutely necessary to do so. An analytical technique is being developed that is capable of detecting genetically modified food to well below the 1 per cent. threshold to which the European Union has agreed—even to small fractions of a percentage—but that can be done only if a marker gene is present in the crop.

There are other difficulties. I do not have time to list them all today. If we get it wrong, we could produce unknown viruses or other unknown micro-organisms. We might produce foods that give rise to new allergies or toxic effects, but scientists and the Government have the ability to control that. I have worked with many scientists over the years, and I fully appreciate that their research has only one purpose—to advance the cause of human nature. They are working not to damage it, but to try to enhance the quality of life.

Demands have been made to stop the development of GM crops, largely on the grounds that we do not need them; at the very least, a moratorium has been called for on commercial development in the United Kingdom, if not throughout the world. The former is a luddite reaction, and the Government have rightly made it clear that they will not allow commercial planting until we are satisfied that the risks have been reduced to an acceptable level. They will never be reduced to zero. We take risks in everything that we do. However, if we allow GM crops to be released for commercial growing, we must be persistently involved in post-release monitoring. That monitoring must be funded by the Government as well as by others.

As has been said, we are at the cutting edge of genetic engineering, which will have huge commercial benefits for the country. We must not even begin to listen to the luddites, or the research will go underground. Scientists will carry on the work, but we shall not hear about it because it will be driven underground—or, even worse, it will be driven abroad. I warn the Chamber that Zeneca moved its research and development in genetic engineering to what was at the time a much more conducive atmosphere—the United States of America.

The added danger of giving in to the doom merchants is that it will have a knock-on effect on genetic engineering in the health arena. Some difficult debates lie ahead of us. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) and I witnessed that the other evening during a debate on therapeutic cloning.

I am aware of the risks. As elected Members of Parliament, we must be absolutely sure, by watching all developments, that they are made for the good of mankind. We must also try to reduce the risks to a minimum.

5.14 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I warmly welcome this afternoon's debate. I congratulate both Select Committes on having produced outstanding reports, both of which have made a valuable contribution to the debate that raged during 1999, often producing more heat than light. Each of the reports is admirably rational, and has helped to act as a counterweight to some of the more emotive contributions to the debate.

I start, as others have done, by acknowledging that the Minister—I welcome him here this afternoon—is conspicuous as being one of the few members, if not the only member, of the Government who recognise the importance of the environmental questions raised by the use of genetically modified crops. I congratulate him on that. I regret that the Government's approach last year was characterised by a good deal of confusion and a fair amount of incompetence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) said that in February 1999 the Leader of the Opposition suggested, as did I, that the Government should take the advice of English Nature and delay commercial planting of genetically modified crops until research had shown that they were environmentally safe. The commentators in the Press Gallery were astonished when the Prime Minister poured scorn on the idea. He said that it would not be sensible to do so and that the scientific evidence did not support it. He said that public concern would increase if such delay were imposed. That was an early example of the Prime Minister's tendency, which we now see more frequently, to make claims that are utterly without justification.

On 4 February, the then Minister of State at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), told the House that commercial planting could take place as early as the autumn of 1999. On 18 February, the Deputy Prime Minister and the then Cabinet enforcer, the right hon. Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), sent a "Dear Colleague" letter to all hon. Members. It said:

> "We believe it would be appropriate to allow a move to limited and carefully monitored commercial production after, say, one year of farm-scale trials."

Happily, matters have advanced a bit since then. Both Select Committee reports took the view that it was important to establish what scientists had to say before allowing commercial planting.

The Committees' advice and calls made by the Conservative party and many members of the public have been heeded, at least in part. I cite that letter not only to point out that some of us arrived there a little ahead of the Government, but to emphasis the extent and nature of the Government's recent change of policy. I hope that the Minister understands that many people would like to hear the new policy reiterated without equivocation as often as possible. I hope that he will use this opportunity to confirm that the Government will not permit any commercial planting of GM crops until it is clear that it is environmentally safe to do so, and that he will confirm that no abitrary timetable will be imposed.

I have enormous respect for the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson)—I know that his prospects in the Labour party are already pretty low, so it will do him no harm to say that—although I do not share all his views. However, I do not believe that it is right to campaign for a specific five-year freeze. It is not scientifically sound. We must wait until research tells us that it is safe. I do not know how long that will be; it could be more than five years, it could be less.

It is important to proceed rationally. I hope that the Minister will confirm that that is the Government's intention, and that there is no fixed timetable. I say that because, paragraph 33 of the Government's response to the Environmental Audit Committee, specifically states that the agreement does not extend beyond the year 2002. There seems to be a time limit on it.

Both Select Committee reports raise a wide number of issues and I have time to touch on only a few of them. The Science and Technology Committee's recommendation (h) referred to the need for EU regulations to

> "permit local discretion in relation to specific farming practices and habitats in any particular region."

I strongly endorse that recommendation. If Britain is to protect its biodiversity and if we are to maintain and improve the high-quality environment that people want and deserve, we cannot allow a situation whereby a majority of votes at EU level leads to genetically modified crops being planted in Britain, possibly against the wishes of the British people and of the elected Government of the day. The Government's response to that recommendation was couched in very general terms and I hope that the Minister will reassure us that the Government will be ready to defend local habitats where necessary.

Recommendation (i) of the Science and Technology Committee report refers to the precautionary principle, to which other hon. Members have referred and which is also mentioned in the Environmental Audit Committee report. The Minister will be well aware of the widespread public concern about the consequences of not applying the precautionary principle in relation to several aspects of GMOs. The Government's response to recommendation (i) is extremely vague. It makes no reference to the precautionary principle but refers only to an "appropriate precautionary approach". It would be helpful if the Minister could explain his distinction between an "appropriate precautionary approach" and a precautionary principle, which was the phrase used in both the Select Committee reports.

Another issue of great and topical concern is that of GM crop trials. Since that programme of trials is expanding rapidly and will cover a much greater area in the coming year, it is important to address some of the anxieties. First, will the Minister tell us whether the Government are confident that none of the produce from those trials will inadvertently be consumed by people who would wish to avoid doing so? Secondly, is he satisfied that he has the resources available for monitoring the trials, which will enable him to be sufficiently rigorous in ensuring that all the conditions attached to them are properly enforced? This is probably the right moment to say that I condemn absolutely and without reservation any unlawful disruption of the trials. Critics of GM crops—those who want to prevent them from being grown in this country—should confine their actions to legal forms of protest, of which plenty are available. By the same

token, it is equally fair to say that the companies carrying out the trials also have a duty to honour the conditions laid on them. Unfortunately, there have already been examples of those conditions being breached.

Thirdly, will the Minister tell us what compensation may be available to neighbouring farmers, whether conventional or organic, whose crops suffer contamination from nearby GM crop trials? There is little comfort for those farmers in the Government's response to recommendation (n) of the Environmental Audit Committee report, on liability. I strongly endorse paragraph 55 of that report. The news today of a study commissioned by the Soil Association, which questions the adequacy of the isolation distances, is another example of why the question of compensation is extremely relevant and urgent. Fourthly, in regard to the evaluation of crop trials and the measurement of the possible environmental gain from GM crops, does the Minister accept the need to compare the effect of GM crops on the environment, not just with the effect of continuing to farm intensively on the same land, but with different methods of farming on that land?

I disagreed with the Science and Technology Committee on one issue: its recommendation (t), referred to by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath), which suggested that the Government were right to rely exclusively on data provided by applicants when making assessments. That may be acceptable in several, if not the majority of, instances, but it cannot possibly be right to depend totally in every case on information provided by organisations that have a substantial commercial interest in the outcome. I am interested in the Minister's view on that.

I should like to touch on the concept of substantial equivalence in regard to assessment.

Dr. Michael Clark: On our response to recommendation (t), may I point out to my hon. Friend that we did not say that it would be appropriate or practical to use applicants' own data exclusively. We meant that it should not be rejected as biased information and that it should be included in the assessment.

Mr. Yeo: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that clarification, which I entirely accept. In paragraph 61 of its report, the Science and Technology Committee expressed a limited and qualified reservation about relying too heavily on substantial equivalence. In responding to recommendation (v), the Government did not refer to substantial equivalence. Are we to take it from that omission that the Minister has no doubts about the use of the principle of substantial equivalence?

Paragraph 52 of the Environmental Audit Committee report refers to the need for better labelling. Consumers are entitled to know the country of origin and the method of production of the food that they eat. Labelling should also specify whether a product contains GM ingredients. The threshold for such a declaration is a matter for debate and will no doubt be periodically reviewed. I understand that it is technically possible to measure a very small content of GM ingredients, so I hope that the Government will in due course move below the figure of 1 per cent. that is currently used.

Many hon. Members have rightly referred to the biosafety protocol. The Environmental Audit Committee report expresses a clear view on that, in paragraph 48:

"explicit subordination of a multilateral environmental agreement, such as the Biosafety Protocol, to international trade rules would be a deeply unfortunate precedent to set."

That puts it rather nicely. The Government's response to it was, however, characteristically opaque. Paragraph 40 states that multilateral agreements should have equal standing and status with international trade rules. I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us what will happen when there is an absolute conflict between the two. If both sets of rules have to be dealt with and they are in direct contravention to each other, one will clearly have to come down on one side or the other. I hope that the Minister will also say whether he believes the precautionary principle will have a role in the protocol.

Finally, on the question of animal feed, the Science and Technology Committee acknowledged in paragraph 35 of its report the need to extend the separation of genetically modified and conventional crops for the purposes of animal feed and meat products. I am sure that consumer pressure will in any case force moves in that direction and it would be helpful if the Government gave such developments their support. I note that, in their response to that Report, the Government did not refer to animal feed.

In conclusion, although I recognise that GM crops have the potential to confer great environmental and productivity benefits, they also—espeically, perhaps, in a small and crowded island such as Britain—carry significant environmental risks. The scientific evidence suggests that such environmental concerns are much more relevant than any health risks about which people have been concerned.

I urge the Minister to proceed with care and not to run risks with our environment. I believe that the protection of the British environment does not need to inhibit our role as a leader in the biotechnology industry—a leadership that will be strengthened, not weakened, if public confidence in the Government's handling of the issue is restored.

5.29 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): Having listened to the debate for most of the past three hours, I believe that it is one of the best and most outstandingly enlightening debates—despite the differences involved—that I have heard in the House for a long time. I warmly congratulate the Chairs and members of the Committees on two reports that set out an improved and balanced framework for sensible debate. All power to hon. Members' elbows in ensuring that that new spirit prevails, because it is certainly needed. I also thank the two Chairs for the fair and balanced way in which they presented the reports.

We have considered the two reports extremely carefully. Last year, we published the Government's formal responses, to which the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) referred at some length. As we explained then, many of the Committee's

[Mr. Michael Meacher]

recommendations have already been acted on. We have opened up and strengthened our regulatory procedures, as we were asked to do, and we have introduced a more strategic approach through the new commissions—the Human Genetics Commission and the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission—and the Food Standards Agency.

We have worked to ensure that the GM debate is based to a greater extent on scientific fact by, for example, launching the GM information site, for which we received credit from Greenpeace and the Consumers Association, so it cannot have been that bad. We offered to host the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development conference on GM foods, which will take place in Edinburgh shortly, and we are increasing consumer choice by leading the way in Europe in pressing for an agreement to extend labelling requirements to caterers and restaurants, which have now been extended to additives; and by supporting other farming methods, especially organic farming. We inherited a programme valued at about £1 million a year; it is now £19 million a year. Many people would say that that is still not enough, but it is certainly a considerable increase.

We have tried to put in place what I regard as the four central props of a sensible policy. The first of those props is to strengthen the regulatory procedures in respect of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment. We have extended its brief to require it to take into account, not only direct, but indirect effects and not only immediate, but delayed effects—and cumulative effects, to which I shall return. We have ensured that ACRE is free of commercial interests—not that I doubt the integrity of people with an industrial background, but, like Caesar's wife, ACRE must be seen to be above reproach, and we must avoid even the public perception that an improper influence might be involved. We have also ensured that the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes has opened up its workings to the public gaze, which I strongly support.

The second prop is the farm-scale evaluations, which many hon. Members mentioned, and the four-year programme. No widespread growing will take place before 2003, and it will do so then only if a null hypothesis is generated. The hon. Member for South Suffolk was kind enought to refer to me generously. As I have repeatedly said, no commercial planting will take place until we have sufficient evidence to judge authoritatively whether damage to the environment is involved. Many people think that, once the four-year period has passed, commercialisation will take off. That is not so. The null hypothesis case must be demonstrated not only to me or to the Government, but on the basis of evidence that will be made fully and transparently available.

The third prop is the important strengthened directive 90/220, which Environment Ministers agreed last June. A string of important measures has been introduced to strengthen the regulatory system, especially post-market monitoring, which is important. Some hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East (Dr. Iddon), mentioned the ending of the use of antibiotic marker genes. He is right. Ethical considerations will be brought into account—it is not an easy issue, but they should certainly be included. Licences will have a 10-year limit in order to keep the matter continually and genuinely—not merely continually, as they say in Whitehall, where everything is continually under review—under review. The fourth prop is the biosafety protocol; the international trading element is very important and I shall certainly attend negotiations on that subject.

Hon. Members made many points, which I shall try to cover. The hon. Member for Rayleigh (Dr. Clark), who made a fair and generous speech, referred to the need for honesty in newspaper reporting—I am sure that we would all agree—and to the need for morality in relation to not only the experiment but the consequences. I understand his point. It would be an advantage to be able to prevent potato rot or to provide crops that can grow in more saline or frosty soils, for example. The problem is that those in the biotech industry have shown far more interest in the producer—themselves—and their own benefit than in the consumer. However, that does not mean that potential for the consumer does not exist.

I understand the argument that many hon. Members have made that potential benefit exists for developing countries. The problem is the lack, not of biotech, but of control over rapidly expanding populations and of proper land redistribution and farm reform. Those aspects, too, are important parts of the process. I agree with whoever said that Monsanto, by patenting the terminator gene, has probably been the most successful company possible in turning public opinion against its own interest. Although it has now desisted, that caused undue but great, and probably justifiable, anxiety in the minds of the public about its intentions.

The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) made several points. He mentioned the need for a Government statement on the benefits of GM. Once again, I have been stereotyped as being on the sceptical wing, but I would be the first to recognise that GM has many potential benefits, and not only in respect of medicine. It has provided insulin for diabetes, helped protect people undergoing chemotherapy from infection and produced safe blood products for haemophiliacs. In dealing with agriculture, however, it is a different matter, and in the face of such opposition, many people would ask, "Why bother?" I accept the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, South-East. I do not think that people are interested in rosier apples, sweeter taste or longer shelf life, but if GM can add proteins, reduce fats or produce pest-resistant foods, we would be wrong not to continue to investigate that potential. All members of the Government recognise that such benefits may be possible.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) asked how I could be sure that farm-scale evaluations would not be rubbished. I cannot be sure, but the protocol for the evaluations, which was published in February 1999, is on the table and has been endorsed by English Nature. The interim report on the conduct of the first year of the trials was published in November. The trials are being carried out to the highest scientific standards according to published guidelines, and are being overseen by a scientific steering committee, which is independent of the Government, and which includes two representatives of English

Nature, one of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and several other academic representatives. The trials are entirely independent of industry and are being funded by the Government. Although they will no doubt be attacked, they have a firm foundation. We are trying to do it properly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Joan Ruddock) made several points with which I shall try to deal quickly. Her first point was about consumer choice and the 1 per cent. threshold. We should like to go below that as soon as possible, and I am keen to reach a 0.1 per cent. threshold. I am told that a laboratory in Birmingham can achieve that, but we do not yet know whether it would be feasible throughout the country. We are investigating the matter, and have asked the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission to review the situation within two years.

Secondly, my hon. Friend mentioned Tesco, which has now gone back on what I imagine it sees as a slightly premature statement. Certainly, its action had no basis in scientific evidence and it has made its full support for the trials clear. Its proposed ban will operate for only one year after the fields have been used for GM crops, and it covers only field vegetable and salad crops. It has been specified that the crop following the GM planting in the farm-scale trials will be maize or wheat, so the issue will not arise.

My hon. Friend also asked what I meant by unacceptable effects of GM. That is not my decision or a decision for civil servants and other Ministers. The judgment will have to be made on evidence that will be put before the public and on which there will have to be a public debate. She also asked about marketing consents granted during the trials. Each approval is based on its own criteria. Therefore, seeds registration or pesticides approval will proceed if they meet the criteria. Even if all approvals are granted—GMO marketing, seeds registrations and pesticides approval—the produce, which could be fed to animals, will be labelled, including meat and milk.

My hon. Friend was right to raise the question of the difference between GM in contained systems and in open fields, but the farm-scale trials are about the impact on biodiversity, and we can get that evidence only if they are based on open-field trials. All the products have already been tested in the laboratory and in much smaller field-scale trials.

I shall attend the biosafety protocol meeting. Let me make it clear that the United Kingdom and the European Union, which we fully support, will insist on the three principles that we upheld at Cartagena. They are: that an advanced, informed agreement must govern the first trans-boundary movement of GMOs to other countries; that adequate labelling and documentation must be provided so that importing countries know what they are doing and understand what is involved; and that we cannot and will not accept the savings clause that the United States and the Miami group are demanding, as it would subordinate the biosafety protocol to the rule of the World Trade Organisation and free trade. We will not stand for that, because it would blow acceptance of the technology out of the water.

I am rapidly running out of time. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome referred to separation distances, as did several other hon. Members. Separation distances are not intended to secure a total insulation of the effects of GM crops from the surrounding countryside. Given the messy nature of the world in which we live, that is not possible. Even if we accepted the Soil Association's figure of six miles, that would simply be exercising a precautionary measure to reduce cross-pollination. I accept that the issue is extremely fraught and I well understand many people's unhappiness about it. We are trying to ensure that UKROFS, the UK register of—what does the "f' stand for? Well, we are trying to ensure that the Soil Association and its friends discuss SCIMAC—the supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops—with the industry to see whether they can agree. I do not think that Government can simply lay down the law. The settlement must be between both types of farming, so that they can live together.

The hon. Gentleman also said that we are not the cheerleaders for biotech, and we are not. We are not pro-GM or anti-GM. We are pro-safety, pro-environment and pro-choice. He raised the question of animal genes in crop plants transferring to the environment. No crops with animal genes have been tested in the UK and we have an assurance from the industry that there are no proposals to develop such crops.

It being fifteen minutes to Six o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 January 2000

[MR. MICHAEL J. MARTIN *in the Chair*]

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

10 am

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I have a confession to make: I am slightly weird. There must be something slightly odd about me, because I seem not to be interested in the really important things in life, at least as defined by the popular mass media. I am not terribly interested in such vital matters as the private lives of presidents and princes, pop stars and television soap stars, which fill the front pages, and I cannot even claim great interest in the religious beliefs of football managers. What do interest me are matters that, given the number of headlines they generate, must appear to others to be trivial. To be honest, I get rather obsessed with the trivial pursuit of human survival.

In 1982, Mr. Perez de Cuellar, who at the time was Secretary-General of the United Nations, said, in effect, that he thought that the world was drifting towards war. He made that statement in London, the capital and centre of our media. What he meant was that there was a real risk of our drifting towards world war three, in which nuclear weapons would be used and the consequences for us all would be beyond human imagination. Mr. de Cuellar's speech gained two or three paragraphs in one Sunday newspaper. All our other papers were far too busy covering such issues as whether there was a relationship between Prince Andrew and Koo Stark—the really important issue of the day.

To introduce a measure of balance, I accept that the media would argue that they reflected public attitudes. They could claim that we as politicians are capable of being equally guilty in this respect. In addition, Mr. Perez de Cuellar's worst fears were not fulfilled: fortunately, the future held perestroika and glasnost, the ending of the cold war and the reversal of the nuclear arms race. Recalling the legend of Cassandra, I am aware of the danger of being branded a prophet of doom and so being unlikely to be believed, even though there is the rather worrying tradition of Cassandra's predictions coming true. At this time of millennium, when religious cranks prophesy false dooms, there is even greater reason not to believe doomsayers. However, the start of a millennium is perhaps a time when even politicians can look forward, beyond the traditional week—a long time in politics—to the next century, the next millennium and beyond.

If modern cosmological theories are correct, there is, I understand, the prospect of our planet surviving for a few thousand million years. It may therefore be presumed that we can expect the human race to survive for a few thousand million years. One of the greatest dangers to that being realised is, I imagine, an astronomical disaster—our colliding with another planet, which worries the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), or our planet going out of orbit. But the other major threat must surely be weapons of mass destruction.

In the worst-case analysis so popular with defence analysts, even if we reduce weapons to the level proposed in the strategic arms reduction talks—START 2—there will be sufficient weapons of mass destruction to destroy the human race. There is no reason to suppose that, in future millenniums, we shall not be capable of producing weapons even more lethal than currently exist. We may have devised the means of destroying our civilisation before devising the means of preserving it. The fulfilment of that danger would render futile everything that we debate or do in this place—or, indeed, anything that anyone does anywhere.

In the science of risk assessment, it is usual to multiply the scale of a disaster by the probability of its occurrence. We are discussing a scale of disaster that ranges from unimaginably horrendous to absolutely so: "the rest is silence". In relation to probability, we ought not to forget that, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy said that he feared he had lost control of events and that the probability of disaster was between one in three and one in two. Surely, our greatest responsibility to those living in future millenniums is to ensure that that probability never again approaches those levels.

There are disasters on a lesser scale which might appear even more likely to occur. Localised nuclear war is possible—although its consequences would be anything but localised—as is terrorism using weapons of mass destruction. I fear that complacency at the end of the cold war resulted in our failing to take advantage of many opportunities greatly to increase our safety. It was as though, in the euphoria of cutting out a primary cancer, we failed to take adequate precautions to ensure against the development of secondary cancer.

Those dangers are not distant, but potentially immediate. Consider our position this year: China is talking about modernising and increasing its stock of nuclear weapons, the United States Senate has refused to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty and the Russian Duma is refusing to ratify START 2. It is a sad irony that Russia and America share constitutional arrangements whereby a president can make war—but not peace—without consulting the legislature.

The United States is showing signs of hardline, isolationist attitudes. Especially worrying during a period of electioneering are hardline statements on the anti-ballistic missile treaty and talk—even by presidential candidates—of cavalierly abandoning that treaty. Such action could undermine the credibility of all treaties, encourage other nuclear weapons states to begin to rebuild their stocks and increase the atmosphere of fear growing in Russia, where acting President Putin has issued a statement the effect of which is to lower the nuclear threshold and abandon the idea of partnership with the west.

All that might be electioneering rhetoric, but it is dangerous because it raises the risk of disaster engulfing us as a result of misunderstanding and accident. It has been said that, at some point in the past couple of years, the United States warned Moscow that it was going to launch a communications satellite from Norway.

[Mr. Malcolm Savidge]

However, Russian command and control were so poor that they forgot to warn the local radar station and a nuclear alert began. Imagine that happening in a time of more dangerous attitudes.

Perhaps Putin is only electioneering, but, in India, the Bharatiya Janata party's electioneering led to a dangerous position developing between that country and Pakistan, so reminding us of the perils of proliferation and localised nuclear wars. Who knows how frighteningly close India and Pakistan came to a localised nuclear war over Kashmir? Let us be under no illusions: we are not talking about only localised consequences, or even a devastating holocaust affecting only India and Pakistan, but talking about fallout, climate change—possibly even nuclear winter—affecting surrounding countries, many of which are desperately poor and rely on subsistence agriculture.

Proliferation also raises the possibility of weapons of mass destruction passing to some of the least stable states, which have some of the most unbalanced leaders. There is a risk of nuclear, biological and chemical materials, know-how and delivery systems spreading. Such fears have been exacerbated by the break-up of the Soviet Union, but proliferation poses risks from other countries too.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Is not that dangerous development one of the reasons for maintaining a limited anti-ballistic missile defence system to deal with threats from rogue states? Such a system could meet those threats, even though it could not meet a larger strategic threat from a super-power.

Mr. Savidge: I am strongly in favour of discussion and debate on that issue. I am aware that people line up on different sides of the argument. Some, for example, believe that if the United Nations had an anti-ballistic missile system, it would make us all safer. I am not sure that that argument is right, which is why I favour debate. I shall speak in more detail later about the "we are the good guys" syndrome. I am frightened about United States policy, which could give an impetus to the arms race, rather than reduce the number of nuclear weapons. It could also create paranoia in Russia and in other states. If there is a cavalier abandonment of one treaty, who will enter into treaties in future?

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the argument about rogue states is accepted by the United States, which has continued its programme to extend its anti-ballistic missile system, a precedent has been set that enables every other state in the world to express a fear about isolated attacks from rogue states and to argue that such a system should be an essential part of its defensive strategy? Those in the United States and elsewhere who support that argument should ask themselves whether the world would be a safer place if every state escalated the nuclear arms race with a further round of ABM defensive systems.

Mr. Savidge: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I shall say more later about the danger of nuclear futures.

To return to my previous point, rogue states give rise to the danger of know-how and materials spreading to other states. As civil satellites develop, there is a further possibility of blurring the distinction between rockets for military and for civil purposes.

The Aum sect of Japan alerts us to another danger—that of religious or political fanatics engaging in terrorism using nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, and such groups need have no problem with delivery systems. Before long, we could face a nuclear bomb in a briefcase, or a boat sailing off the west coast of the United States, spreading anthrax in the wind.

We all recognise that the probability of such disasters occurring is far too high, that we urgently need to reduce those risks, and that the issue should transcend party politics. Therefore, I am glad that we are talking in Westminster Hall, where the atmosphere is more conducive to dialogue and discussion than to point scoring.

No simple or single solutions exist. Treaty negotiations must be central, but they are in a parlous state. I have already mentioned the ABM treaty, and I am conscious of the fact that most hon. Members on both sides of the House think that we should press the United States to uphold its current negotiated treaty. I know that the Front Benchers of both main parties share the desire to persuade our US allies to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty. The early-day motion that I tabled showed overwhelming support among Back Benchers of all parties for such a policy.

All nuclear weapons states must recognise that we cannot indefinitely proclaim our good intention of making massive cuts in our nuclear weapons stocks, or even eliminating them, without producing results. People in other countries are suspicious that we sometimes sound a little like St. Augustine, who prayed for chastity, but not yet. I applaud the efforts that our Government, the United States and others are making to improve the situation in India and Pakistan, to persuade those countries to engage in the test ban treaty and to reduce the risk there. However, we should lead by example.

The nuclear non-proliferation treaty will be renegotiated this year. The treaty was agreed in 1995, when people could see that the two major nuclear weapons states had made massive reductions in arms; however, they have made few cuts since. The danger is that the treaty will not be ratified, or that people might simply pay lip service to it and so enable proliferation to occur. In answer to the question of whether proliferation matters, some ideologues in the United States say that proliferation would make us safer and that it could constitute ultimate deterrence, because if everybody had nuclear weapons, no one would use them. The National Rifle Association of America uses the same argument in respect of guns, and we know how well that works.

There is an urgent need to give new impetus to efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation and to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. I should like to refer to the proposal advanced by the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), during the debate on the Queen's Speech. He said that the United Kingdom could take the

initiative by convening a conference of the members of the United Nations Security Council. The conference would discuss setting up new strategic arms reduction talks—START 3—involving all nuclear weapon states; reviewing all treaties, including the ABM treaty; promoting a declaration of all nuclear weapons stocks, with the aim of producing an inventory, which the UN would keep, of all the nuclear weapon stocks of all the de facto nuclear weapon states; and engaging in serious negotiations on weapons reduction and entry into a nuclear weapons convention.

That is a serious and sensible suggestion. The United Kingdom has already taken a lead on two of the other major issues facing our species: climate change and third-world debt. As we enter the new millennium, we could give no better lead than on the crucial issue of nuclear non-proliferation.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in giving way again. Can he envisage such negotiations resulting in Britain giving up all its nuclear weapons while countries such as Russia, the United States, France or China retain some of theirs?

Mr. Savidge: I tend to think of such questions as technical matters which can be considered during negotiations. I say that for two reasons: first, the question whether all countries would give up their weapons at the same time would be a matter for negotiation; secondly, we should remember that we belong to military alliances, which means that Britain could be in a position to give up its weapons before certain other countries did. It could be rather difficult to say that Britain would give up all its weapons before certain other countries did.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I am very interested in the hon. Gentleman's speech. Before he leaves the nuclear issue, will he tell the Chamber his views on the fissile material throughout the world that is currently unaccounted for? There is concern about the fact that approximately 100 suitcase-sized nuclear bombs are missing from Russian military stocks and, of the high-grade fissile material, 4 per cent. is unaccounted for. Would the hon. Gentleman feature that matter in the scenario that he is laying out for us?

Mr. Savidge: I thank the hon. Lady for that helpful intervention. I was, in part, thinking of that when I mentioned fears about proliferation. I intend to discuss the vital importance of trying to restrict fissile and other dangerous materials a little later on.

When thinking about nuclear disarmament, we should consider, not only "vertical", but "horizontal" nuclear disarmament, which includes detargeting, de-alerting and increasing notice-to-fires—steps that have already been taken by the United Kingdom—along with decoupling and separating warheads from delivery systems. I am using the terminology that Jonathan Schell employs in his valuable book "The Gift of Time", which is a summary of many useful suggestions made by leading experts around the world on steps that we could take to improve our safety.

We should be flexible about new thinking, wherever it comes from, and prepared at least to consider any confidence-building measures that are suggested. Germany, for example, suggested no first use, although one is aware that, at the moment, that suggestion would be rather more welcome in China than in Russia. We should also examine constructively proposals from non-nuclear weapons states. As I said in response to the hon. Lady's intervention, we should also seek ways in which to control, as best we can, the spread of dangerous materials and delivery systems and to expand nuclear weapons-free zones.

We should not neglect the dangers posed by biological weapons—a most dangerous aspect of proliferation. They are often described as the poor countries' nuclear weapons and they are the weapons that can most easily be used by terrorist groups. The biological and toxin weapons treaty was useful, but was wilfully flouted by several signatories, most notably the Soviet Union. There was a simple reason for that: no verification was involved. Now, perhaps because of pressure from its biotechnology industries, the United States appears to be reluctant to adopt verification measures. In response to those members of the United States political right who say that the Soviet duplicity on this issue should show us the danger of trusting treaties, I quote Ronald Reagan, who said that we should, "Trust, but verify". Verification will be important in all future treaties.

By all means, let each nation look critically at every peace proposal, but let us also look critically at every proposal from our military-industrial complexes to expand our military might. I forget which of our eminent Victorian statesmen it was who, when told by one of the chiefs of staff that we should increase our garrisons in India in case the Tsar intended to attack Britain via the sub-continent, said that he was rather surprised that the chiefs of staff did not want us to garrison the Moon in case we were attacked from Mars. One example of why it is useful to remember that is the frequent assertion that we should develop weapons now, not because of any existing risk, but because someone else may develop nuclear or other weapons in future. Although I am not expert in the language of the stock exchange, I believe that trading in "nuclear futures" is dangerous.

I said that I would refer to the danger of nations adopting a "we are the good guys" mentality. Every nation and every treaty organisation has a tendency to think itself or its members as the good guys and to believe that everybody should therefore trust their good intentions. Even though we do not talk so much now about the other side being the bad guys, the fact that we still do not think of them as the good guys implies that they cannot be trusted. Given the current sensitive situation in Russia, it is important that we try to understand Russian perceptions when we pursue matters such as NATO expansion. It is not that we should not pursue such matters, but that we should try to see how other nations perceive our actions and ensure that our actions are not destabilising.

I have advanced only a few proposals; other hon. Members will undoubtedly want to make other suggestions during the debate. Above all, reform of the United Nations—especially the Security Council—is vital if we are to create a system of world governance, or even world government. We have to improve regional security and conflict resolution. Nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction cannot be disinvented, so we can be safe only if we can halt wars

[Mr. Savidge]

and the causes of wars. As we look back over the experience of the past century, or even at our entire human history, we cannot be complacent about how easy it will be to lift the sword of Damocles from above us.

I am pleased that the all-party group that is being set up this week has attracted interest from hon. Members of all parties and with widely differing views on defence matters. It is vital that we leave behind old slogans, old positions and old arguments. We must be prepared to look at new thinking. Recently, progress has come from unilateral initiatives and unilateral responses, such as those made by the present Government and the previous Government. Progress has also been made by bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral negotiations. There is a place for all those.

Above all, we need to discuss, debate, publicise and make progress on these issues. We must not slide into a situation where, through accident, misunderstanding or an act of madness, ultimate disaster occurs. We must "not go gently into that good night". As we contemplate the coming millennium, we have the technical capability decisively to rein back the four horsemen of the apocalypse, or to unleash them with devastating effect in the coming millennium.

I conclude by quoting from what I regard as Albert Einstein's last will and testament: a manifesto that he signed with 10 others of the world's greatest scientists a few days before he died. It includes the following words:

"We are speaking on this occasion not as members of this and that nation, continent or creed, but as human beings, members of the species Man, whose continued existence is in doubt. There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal as human beings to human beings—remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death."

10.23 am

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) on securing the debate. The number of hon. Members present this morning is proof of the debate's importance to the House, and the subject's importance to society and to the world.

If we had to pick a time of maximum difficulty in making progress on the arms control agenda, especially in respect of weapons of mass destruction, we would probably have to say that it is now. The period preceding the United States presidential elections is not usually one in which the American regime focuses on such issues. Russia is conducting an internal war in Chechnya, and great uncertainty among the Russian people about their Government and their future makes for a less than easy time there. The situation on the Indian sub-continent has become unstable following nuclear testing by India and Pakistan; that, inevitably, has knock-on effects on China. The issue of proliferation is of huge importance, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North made clear. The urgency of controlling proliferation is driven by the fact that, although the many achievements of control systems are there for all to see, there have also been many failures, the most obvious examples being India and Pakistan.

My hon. Friend touched on non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction. It is important to recognise that what used to be called the poor man's bomb—although, these days, chemical and biological weapons should probably be called the poor person's bomb—retains its astonishingly dangerous potential. Although the verification regime for chemical weapons has slowly become adequate because of greater testing, the framework for biological weapons still has a significant way to go. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will comment specifically on the possibility of progress being made in respect of biological weapons. I pay tribute to the work done by British officials during the various negotiations on biological weapons. I have no doubt that they have done as much as anyone to keep that show on the road and drive the agenda forward. It is an extraordinarily difficult job, but Britain's role has been significant.

The simple truth is that Britain and the nuclear powers have a particular responsibility as regards biological and chemical weapons. If we, from our lofty standpoint as nuclear powers, say that we need do no more than exhort others either to abjure development of such weapons or to give up existing weapons, we are kidding ourselves: the rest of the world will not treat that as credible—it will simply say that nuclear development is not necessarily the cheapest way to get into the weapons of mass destruction game. We should not be surprised if people want more than mere posturing and words on our part.

The onus on nuclear weapons states is to examine how we can begin to break certain parts of that deadlock. There are no overnight solutions: I am profoundly convinced that immediate success is not available to anyone. However, progress is possible and, as a nuclear weapons state, Britain has a pivotal role to play. We must examine the future—the not-too-distant future—of our own nuclear weapons, because technological change inevitably brings the possibility of technological obsolescence. If we know what our own long-term plans are, we shall be able to strike a position on the world stage that gives us influence over other nuclear weapons states. An open and honest approach to the debate might also give us influence over non-nuclear weapons states. The current Government have already done far more to achieve transparency in that respect than any previous UK Government or, indeed, any other Government in the world. By setting such an example to the rest of the world, we enhance our ability to tell countries such as France and even China that it is important to seize the opportunity to de-escalate. The alternative is escalation.

I shall speak briefly on the crucial importance of China, India and Pakistan. Historically, this debate has had a European or, at least, a Euro-Atlantic focus. However, modern Asia currently represents the most unstable element in the nuclear debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North said, China is a modernising nuclear state, with nuclear developments in India and Pakistan forming part of its security preoccupations. This morning, the *Financial Times* reported that China's attitude to Pakistan had cooled because it now accepts the need to recognise India's nuclear developments, especially its development of long-rang missiles.

We must engage countries such as India and Pakistan in debate, even though they are not party to existing

treaties. That will be difficult. We must strip away the mythology—that having nuclear weapons is about national aggrandisement, when, in fact, it is rooted in national insecurity. We must persuade the people of India and Pakistan that nuclear weapons do not enhance their security. However, to do that we must be open and honest about our own long-term ambitions and our desire for nuclear de-escalation.

Belief in claims that the world's security is enhanced by expanding missile defence systems does not represent progress for any part of the world, whether the United States or elsewhere. Indeed, it must lead to intensification of the development of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

Mrs. Gillan: What is the hon. Gentleman's attitude to the Americans testing a missile interceptor over the Pacific today? Is he condemning that and the defence readiness review ordered by President Clinton as part of the entire programme?

Mr. Lloyd: Using the language of condemnation is pointless. We should instead use the language of de-escalation and concentrate on ways to remove the tensions that lead to build-up.

The United States may be confident about its position in relation to Russia and the latter's weapons of mass destruction and nuclear capability. That may be a rational view, given that Russia is an economically enfeebled country that cannot afford to sustain its existing nuclear capability. However, the same is not true of China. The United States should be aware that China is achieving enormous economic growth, part of which may be invested in weapons development. If the United States believes that, in the long term, it can defend itself against China on the same basis as it does against Russia, it is sorely mistaken. The way to deal with China is to ensure that the Chinese are again brought to the table to discuss credible nuclear deterrence. In the long run, we want China to be committed to a nuclear-free world and to take positive steps in that direction.

I have spoken longer than I intended. I end by emphasising that, although we tend to concentrate on nuclear weapons, we must recognise the frightening capacity of biological weapons. We need a verification regime, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North has said. However, the prospects for achieving that are further away than many of us would like. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will make it clear that the British Government intend to press for a proper verification system for biological weapons, to parallel that for chemical weapons, which is at least beginning to work.

10.41 am

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I am, in part, speaking this morning as chairman of the parliamentary Labour party Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. My husband, Bob, was its chairman before he was killed, after which the group collapsed. When I entered the House, a group of friends and I formed a new group of the parliamentary Labour party CND, with which I am proud to be associated.

I would like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) for introducing this debate on global security and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—the full title is almost an adjournment debate in itself. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) whose comments were helpful and much in line with my own thinking on Pakistan and India. I have a decent knowledge of that subject because of the nature of my constituency.

I have been a member of CND for 41 years. I pay tribute to that organisation and to the European nuclear disarmament movement, which was led with great distinction by Edward Thompson. He wrote "Protest and Survive", of which I have a copy and which played an important role in making the people in this country aware of the dangers of nuclear weapons. But for the activities of the UK peace movement and similar groups throughout Europe and the rest of the world, including the United States, the US might have supported its foreign policy—particularly in Vietnam—by using nuclear weapons. The Americans had convinced themselves that the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the second world war. What kept them from resolving the Vietnam conflict in the same way? I believe that their strong peace movement, about which we have heard too little, played an important role in convincing the US not to adopt the nuclear option in Vietnam.

To demonstrate that I am not stuck in a time warp of 1960s and 1970s politics, I shall turn to more recent aspects of the US war machine. "Master of Space" is the motto of the US Space Command—a joint air force, army and navy command set up by the Pentagon in 1985. In its "Vision for 2020" report, it makes clear its ambition of

> "dominating the space dimension of military operations to protect US interests and investment. Integrating Space Forces into warfighting capabilities across the full spectrum of conflict . . . Space is the ultimate high ground".

General Joseph Ashy, commander in chief of Space Command, said in 1996:

> "It's politically sensitive, but it's going to happen . . . we're going to fight *in* space. We're going to fight *from* space, and we're going to fight *into* space . . . That's why the US has development programs in directed energy and hit-to-kill mechanisms.

Last year, Kofi Annan urged the United Nations' annual conference on disarmament to

> "codify principles which can ensure that outer space remains weapons-free."

The first secretary of China's mission to the UN, Wang Xiaoyu—my Chinese is not all that good, so hon. Members will have to forgive me if I have not pronounced that correctly—said later in the year:

> "Outer space is the common heritage of human beings . . . It should be used entirely for peaceful purposes and for the economic, scientific and cultural development of all countries as well as the well-being of mankind. It must not be weaponized and become another arena of the arms race."

The track record of the Chinese on human rights is less than wonderful, and I cannot imagine the cultural developments for which outer space could be used—unless it is as some sort of gigantic IMAX screen. However, the Chinese have a clear view that outer space is not there for an extension of the arms race.

[Mrs. Ann Cryer]

Last November, 138 nations voted in the UN General Assembly to reaffirm the outer space treaty and its provision that space

"shall be for peaceful purposes."

Only the United States and Israel abstained. Lest we entertained any doubt about the Pentagon's position on the subject, Keith Hall, assistant secretary of the Air Force for Space, gave it to us loud and clear:

"Space dominance, we have it, we like it and we're going to keep it."

The US may be reluctant to pay its massive debts to the UN, but there is no problem with cash for research into weapons in space. The budget for Ronald Reagan's star wars, known under the Clinton Administration as ballistic missile defence, has held steady at about $4 billion a year, supplemented by additional, not-very-well-kept-secret billions: last March, Congress approved an additional $6.6 billion. All my information on America's ambitions for weapons in space comes courtesy of Professor Karl Grossman of the State university of New York, who has carried out a massive amount of meticulous research on the subject. His piece for *The Nation*, on 27 December 1999, which was jointly written with Judith Long, graphically illustrates the additional problem of space weapons being nuclear powered:

"It . . . offers the specter of a fleet of Chernobyls orbiting the Earth."

That is chilling.

Given the highly macho quotes from Pentagon sources, none of us should have been too surprised when, a few months ago, the Senate refused to ratify the international comprehensive test ban treaty. It was suggested that that was more about getting back at the President, post-Lewinsky, than about disagreeing with the treaty itself. Whatever the reason, it is a sad reflection on the thoughts underpinning the politics of what is now the only world power.

I come now to the subject of India and Pakistan and two very sad aspects of their nuclearisation. Last September, I went to Pakistan with four colleagues on a self-financed trip: we saw the appalling conditions in which the vast majority of people there live, and visited hospitals and schools where facilities are appalling. I also have first-hand experience from my advice surgeries, in which I talk to constituents who are some of the poorest people in Keighley, which is not a wealthy area. They are from Mirpur, part of Pakistan. Week after week, they send hard-earned money to their relatives in Pakistan, even though they can ill afford to send it; they do so because they recognise how much poorer their relatives are than themselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North said, it is extremely sad that Pakistan followed India's example. Pakistan could have gained the admiration of the rest of the world by not following India's example and putting the welfare of its people before nuclear aggrandisement. I condemn India for starting the nuclear arms race on the sub-continent, but I also condemn Pakistan for following its example. During our visit to Pakistan, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice) and I spoke to many politicians and political groups. We made it perfectly clear that we thought it an appalling travesty that one of the poorest countries should spend money on nuclear weapons.

If our country helped to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, we would not only achieve a more secure future for generations to come, but contribute to the well-being of the millions who are undernourished, the children who are uneducated and the sick who are untreated. By reducing our reliance on nuclear weapons, we could take a lead in the world and set an example, especially for the underdeveloped countries.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): May I make a plea to hon. Members? This is a very important debate and the Minister must be given adequate time in which to respond fully. If each speaks for approximately three minutes, I shall be able to call the three hon. Members who still wish to speak, because it is the tradition and custom of sittings in Westminster Hall to call the Liberal Democrat spokesman at approximately 11 o'clock.

10.52 am

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall try to comply with your request, but three minutes is a tall order.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) on initiating this debate and on inaugurating the all-party group on this important subject, which had its first meeting this week. This important debate is taking place when international moves towards arms control are slowing down and the prospects are not good. As has been said, weapons of mass destruction can be biological, chemical or nuclear, and I shall comment briefly on each.

Biological weapons are prohibited under the 1972 biological weapons convention, but it is relatively weak and has no verification provisions. The ad hoc group in Geneva is negotiating a draft protocol that would create verification provisions. The spread of biological weapons would seriously threaten world peace, so a rigorous and effective verification process is vital.

The Government's policy on verification is good. It covers the range of inspection measures, from those that are routine to those that are challenged, and includes the sampling of materials at inspected sites. However, the United States is pursuing a policy that would fundamentally weaken the draft protocol by reducing the level of verification. The danger is that the powers for the verification of biological weapons programmes will be insufficient. The Government must take a strong position. I know that they have received support from European Union countries. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) spoke to the ad hoc group in Geneva when he was a Foreign Office Minister. A good signal would be sent if a current Foreign Office Minister went to the group and made it clear that we want an agreement on stronger verification procedures to be reached this year.

The 1993 chemical weapons convention operates successsfully, but there is a problem with the United States, which has made it illegal to send a sample from a United States site for laboratory analysis in another country. That is wrong—imagine if the Iranians or any

other country created such a law. The Government need to make official representations to the United States to make sure that this important convention is not weakened in that way.

The rejection by the United States Senate of the comprehensive test ban treaty was a serious setback for arms control. The pressure for a national missile defence system will have a destabilising effect; it is already building up to the United States abrogating the 1972 bilateral anti-ballistic missile treaty. That would have a dreadful impact economically and in terms of proliferation, as other countries such as Russia and China would greatly increase their number of ballistic missiles. It is an irresponsible policy by the United States and an abuse of their super-power status. It is also a marker for a future arms race. The Government should challenge the USA on its nuclear policy.

The United States has an obsession with nuclear weapons, even though its Ambassador Thomas Graham said during arms control talks that the perception that nuclear weapons confer a special status on a state is dangerous. That profile can only encourage nuclear proliferation—we have to lower it and move towards disarmament. The perception that chemical and biological weapons bring a mini special status must also be eliminated.

Britain needs a greater separation from the United States on nuclear policy. We must press for greater nuclear arms control worldwide. The counter-proliferation approach will not succeed in the long term, because it is a forceful approach that provokes hostility and resistance and is perceived as one state trying to rule and being partial. We must press ahead on the non-proliferation and agreement approach, which means strengthening laws and strengthening treaties.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North said, United Nations reform is an important part of that process, as it includes proportional responses, administering international law and pursuing matters through the war crimes court. The United States has shown a resistance to complying with and participating in that expanded role for international law; it should be brought into the process. Ours is a dangerous world and current policies are making it more dangerous. Inaction and inertia are no answer. I urge the Government to pursue the arms control agenda.

10.58 am

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): One of the great advantages in having been involved in debates about nuclear defence and disarmament for nearly 20 years is that one can truthfully say, without conceit, that one has heard it all before. Indeed, it is usually helpful to recall that the period when arms negotiations were most complex, developed and thorough was the 1930s, when arms control efforts in the face of aggression led not to peace, but to disaster.

In the three minutes available to me, I shall make four points. The mathematics speak for themselves and the Chamber will forgive me if I do not develop my arguments as fully as I might have done. First, there are two ways of seeking the best method of keeping peace in the world: one is the "peace through strength" approach and the other the "peace through disarmament" approach. Sometimes, they are complementary, but more often than not they are contradictory. They were contradictory during the cold war, when many of the speakers in the debate so far sided with the "peace through disarmament" approach. I would argue, and I think the majority of people in this country would agree, that the "peace through strength" approach was vindicated by events.

Earlier, the hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) rejected the argument for using ABM systems for defence against rogue states, because that argument could be used by any nation. That is an unrealistic view of why nations arm themselves. They do not arm themselves according to what other nations do and say, but after hard-headed calculation of the risks that they believe they face. Nations arming themselves with ABM systems will do so according to the threats facing them, not according to whether western democracies have a limited ABM system to prevent rogue states launching a handful of mass-destruction weapons against them. However, I concede that such a system would be destabilising if it involved trying to counter a strategic threat, as I said in an earlier intervention.

Article 6 of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty is often said to create an obligation for a nuclear-free world. I have always argued that such an outcome would make the world safe again for conventional warfare, which has killed countless millions in years gone by, especially in the century that has just ended. Article 6 brackets a nuclear-free world with a requirement for general and complete disarmament: one is not expected to happen before the other. I would be perfectly happy with a nuclear-free world, provided that there was also general and complete disarmament. However, I advise hon. Members not to hold their breadth.

Finally, I shall put in a brief word for nuclear deterrence. The late Professor Sir Henry Tizard was the most eminent of defence scientists. In 1944 and 1945, he estimated what war would be like after the end of the second world war, when the atomic bomb would be part of the world's arsenals. He said that

"the only answer that we can see to the atomic bomb is to use it ourselves in retaliation."

He was, of course, speaking about threatening to use the bomb, not actually using it.

He also said:

"Duelling was a recognised method of settling quarrels between men of high social standing so long as the duellists stood twenty paces apart and fired at each other with pistols of a primitive type. If the rule had been that they should stand a yard apart with pistols at each other's hearts, we doubt whether it would long have remained a recognised method of settling affairs of honour."

That is why nuclear deterrence kept the peace during the cold war and has a role in international security in future.

11.2 am

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I shall be as brief as possible, making three points for mathematical clarity.

First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) on securing this debate and on his work in getting the ball rolling on the all-party group for non-proliferation, which meets for the first time tomorrow evening. I hope that my hon.

[Mr. David Chaytor]

Friend's work will lead to a debate in the next few weeks, as we approach the NPT review conference. That debate should take place in Government time, as the matters under consideration are weighty and complex, and deserve much more discussion.

I agree completely with remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), especially about chemical and biological weapons being of greatest concern, as the regimes controlling them are weaker than those controlling other weapons of mass destruction. I also accept what he said about the current climate not being conducive to calls for disarmament. With international tensions militating against such calls, we have reached the precise point at which the debate must continue and develop. Those who think they have heard it all before in the past 20 years—or even before then—have the most to learn from future debate.

Secondly, I want to mention the work of the New Agenda coalition, especially the debate at the United Nations last November. I remind hon. Members that the majority of people do not accept nuclear deterrents as a rational form of defence. The New Agenda coalition is a coalition of 60 states—which obtained the support of a further 51 states in the United Nations debate—that believes that the threat of weapons of mass destruction is a threat to the survival of humanity. It is making an urgent call to the nuclear weapons states to intensify their actions to implement article 6 of the non-proliferation treaty, which commits them to seeking the elimination of nuclear weapons.

We should also remember that at that UN General Assembly in November there were calls from across the world—from South Africa in the southern hemisphere and from states in the middle east and central Asia—for the establishment of nuclear weapons-free zones. We must understand that although nuclear weapons have been seen as an integral part of the defence systems of the nuclear weapons states in western Europe and north America, that perception is not shared by a majority of nations or peoples, including nations that could well afford to develop their own nuclear weapons systems if they chose to do so.

Thirdly, as we move towards negotiations on the NPT, I appeal to the Government to exercise the full range of their diplomatic powers and to take a lead internationally on global disarmament. We have a remarkable record of taking leads on various international issues over the past two years. For example, the Government worked on climate change in Kyoto, and they established a global precedent for the abolition of land mines. There was also the elimination of the debt of the very poorest countries. The Government could earn themselves great credit and do the world a service by taking the lead now on the issue of weapons of mass destruction.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I make a plea to Liberal Democrat and other Opposition spokesmen. I want to give the Minister his full 10 minutes, so if they can reduce the length of their speeches, I am sure that hon. Members would be grateful.

11.6 am

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I apologise to my researcher because I have just thrown away three quarters of the speech that she prepared for me. I shall be very brief.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) on initiating this debate. He should in no way apologise for bringing these matters before us. I agree with him: sometimes we concentrate far too much on domestic politics.

The Liberal Democrats believe that the United Kingdom has a unique role to play in this context. After all, we are a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and a leading member of the Commonwealth, G8 and the European Union. I want to canter through some of the things that we believe the Government should be doing. We congratulate them on much of what they have already done—we have certainly seen a sea change—but there is much more that could be done.

The chemicals weapons convention of 1997 has a strong verification mechanism, but the corresponding treaty on biological and toxin weapons does not have an equivalent mechanism. The EU has been pressing for a new binding protocol to establish such a verification regime, and we hope that the Government will push for that. The nuclear non-proliferation treaty is the cornerstone of nuclear control and disarmament regimes. We will be urging the Government to use their influence with our Commonwealth colleagues in India and Pakistan to ensure that those states sign up to the agreement. That is a matter of urgency.

We regard the decision of the United States Senate to reject the ratification of the comprehensive test ban treaty as deeply unfortunate. We also believe that any break-out by the US from the ABM treaty would be deeply destabilising, particularly for relations with Russia and China. It would no doubt also encourage those countries as regards such systems. What additional steps are the Government taking to press the US on that? We have a special relationship with the US and this is one instance where we should use it.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North mentioned the call by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) in the Queen's Speech debate for the UK to convene a conference of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. We believe that that would be a major step towards a new round of arms reduction talks. It should have no holds barred on what it can discuss. That would be a useful step for the Government to take.

We should also work to bring about an annual declaration of all nuclear weapons held by de facto nuclear weapons states under a UN weapons register. We should proceed with negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention to match those for chemical and biological weapons, and we should formalise the commitment of all nuclear weapons states to nuclear disarmament. We believe that an EU decommissioning agency should be established to co-ordinate EU-financed efforts to decommission the obsolete civil and military nuclear hardware of the former Soviet Union.

Finally, we believe that this country has a unique and unambiguous role to play. It is almost 39 years to the day that John F. Kennedy said in his inauguration speech as President:

"Let us never negotiate out of fear—but let us never fear to negotiate."

The United Kingdom can help to achieve that and the Government should take the issue forward. The hon. Member for Aberdeen, North should feel satisfied by his efforts to encourage them to do so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has set a fine example. We should all be grateful to him.

11.10 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I can come only a poor second to that canter around the block.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) on initiating the debate. It was said during a by-election that the hon. Gentleman was savage by name, but not by nature. The gentle way in which he introduced a debate on the serious issue of war was greatly appreciated by us all, not least by me.

There is no doubt that the certainties provided by the threat from the former Soviet Union are now a fading feature of the last century. We can now see more clearly the modern threats posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the ballistic missiles that carry them. However, we should not lose sight of the non-military security issues, which were touched on by some hon. Members this morning. The debate is about global security, which is threatened by non-military factors as well as by weapons of mass destruction.

The hon. Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) mentioned income disparity and economic polarisation, which is one of the most common causes of sub-state violence. The deteriorating situation in Africa, for example, poses a threat to European security and we should not lose sight of that in our debate, or forget that energy and water shortages and access to raw materials are also security issues. Conflicts over water are predicted to be a major cause of war in the new century. Europe relies on resources from less stable parts of the world, and our continued security relies on uninterrupted supplies. Environmental deterioration is almost unstoppable. Each year, millions of people are displaced or perish as their land becomes incapable of supporting the community. Global warming will result in rising sea levels, so we should never forget that more than 50 per cent. of the world's population live in coastal and estuary zones. That poses an unprecedented threat to peace and security.

Internal wars are on the increase. Of the 82 armed conflicts between 1981 and 1992, all but three occurred within states. Conflict prevention must be at the top of our agenda, as it is vastly preferable to conflict resolution. We have not yet developed a satisfactory early warning system. The more that interference in the internal affairs of states occurs, the more we must ensure that the legal basis on which we intervene is secure. We need more analysis, and I make no apology for calling on the Minister once again to instigate a full inquiry into diplomacy and deployment in Kosovo. The Opposition have long called for that, but it has been strenuously resisted by the Government. On the military side, the security agenda has changed from the relative simplicity of maintaining a nuclear deterrent to one that demands greater vigilance, increased diplomacy, more sophisticated allowances and the modernisation of our defences, to a degree that has not yet been recognised by many politicians, not least our own and our European counterparts.

Last year US intelligence estimated that, within 15 years, North Korea will have developed missiles capable of carrying nuclear, chemical or biological warheads with a range long enough to enable it to hit mainland America. Iran has tested a long-range missile to a distance of 1,300 km, which demonstrates the probability that that country, too, is successfully developing extreme long-range capability. Iraq has demonstrated its increasing capabilities: who can forget the devastating Scud missile attacks on Israel during the Gulf war?

The USA is currently evaluating the threats to establish whether the time is right to deploy a national missile defence system. As I mentioned earlier, today's edition of *The Times* carries a timely report on the test of the American missile interceptor. It states:

"The United States will today carry out its most important anti-ballistic missile test over the Pacific Ocean today, using an interceptor 54 inches long.

A successful "kill" will help President Clinton to decide whether to build a missile defence system in Alaska to protect against a rogue ballistic missile attack from North Korea or Iran."

The problems arising from the development of this missile defence system programme have resulted in the current complex discussions with Russia on renegotiating the ABM treaty. The United States is considering seriously co-operating with Russia on a missile defence system, not least because Russia itself will also be exposed to a threat from rogue states, and, as was rightly pointed out, is running short of funds. Indeed, its military system is in decay. I hope that the Minister will have time to outline the Government's stance towards the ABM treaty and its renegotiation, and their approach to the missile defence system. We in Europe seem to have taken little interest in these developments, despite the geographical inevitability that puts us well within range of the threat: we are arguably a more vulnerable target than the USA.

Our lack of interest in considering missile defence systems appears to be based largely on cost and technical feasibility, coupled with a preferred pre-occupation with creating a common European defence as part of a federal European super-state. Without doubt, the United Kingdom is being drawn more deeply into Europe to the exclusion of the US, at a time when Europe should work more closely with America to face the escalating threats. We need to impove western co-operation, not least to counter the sinister chain of co-operation now seen among proliferating states, and to continue to build on NATO and the foundations—laid over many years—of the trans-Atlantic partnership. I should like the Minister to confirm the Government's position in respect of that partnership, tell us what evalution he has made of the developing threats, give us his views on the missile defence capabilities of the UK and Europe and where he sees them going, say what, if

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

anything, is being done to establish the costs and the technical feasibility, and tell us what discussions about current missile tests he and his Department have held.

I hope, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I have stayed within your strictures. The Minister has at least 10 minutes to respond. I congratulate all those hon. Members who took part in the debate but whom I did not single out by name, and I congratulate once more the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North on initiating the debate because it takes this vital issue forward.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, who speaks for the Opposition.

11.17 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Peter Hain): First, I apologise for being unable to take interventions on account of the constraints on time.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge) for giving us the opportunity to debate this important subject. He and other hon. Members have expressed various concerns, many of which I share. I pay tribute to the excellent work done by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), who has provided me with a first-class platform.

In recent months, the world has become a much more dangerous place, as events in Russia, the USA and south Asia show. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer) that the years ahead will be challenging for those of us who wish to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and to improve global security, about which the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) made some valid points. However, I am not sure what the Opposition's policy is on this or many other issues before the House.

A constant challenge is to control the export of equipment, material and technology that might be of use to proliferators. It is hard, unremitting work which often requires difficult judgments. We play an active role in the relevant export control regimes, such as the Zangger committee and the nuclear supplies group in the nuclear sphere, the Australia group in the chemical and biological sphere and the missile technology control regime to prevent missile proliferation.

We are fortunate that a chemical weapons convention is in force, and that many key states are party to it. It contains effective arrangements to verify the destruction of existing chemical weapons and the non-production of such weapons in future, but we still need to secure universal adherence and compliance, together with full implementation of verification arrangements. The Government are pressing ahead vigorously on both fronts, and we strongly support the work of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague.

We are less fortunate with biological weapons. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central is right, and I am grateful to him for his acknowledgement of the work of Government officials. Many states have adhered to the biological and toxin weapons convention, but it does not have adequate verification arrangements. I assure my hon. Friend that we are putting major effort into the negotiations at Geneva to agree a satisfactory verification protocol to the treaty. I also assure my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) that I shall visit Geneva in March to do exactly as he asks. We want those negotiations to be brought to a successful conclusion by the summer.

The main instrument for preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons is the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, or the NPT. One hundred and eight-two states have renounced nuclear weapons by adhering to the treaty as non-nuclear weapons states, but serious difficulties remain. The non-compliers, such as Iraq and North Korea, clearly must be brought back into compliance with the obligations that they have accepted. Until Saddam Hussein made their work impossible, we strongly supported the work in Iraq of the UN special commission and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Since then, no Government have done more to secure agreement in the UN Security Council for the new resolution setting out the way forward, Security Council resolution 1284. We shall vigorously press all states to support the full implementation of that resolution now that it has been agreed. The United Kingdom is also contributing through the European Union to ensure that North Korea returns to full compliance with its safeguards and obligations.

We have constantly made plain our belief that the non-adherers—Israel, India and Pakistan—should sign up to the NPT by destroying their nuclear weapons capability and accepting obligations as non-nuclear weapons states. However, they are firmly convinced that their security positions do not yet permit that course of action. Trying to improve their security positions is therefore a key concern for us. We are heartened by the new impetus in the middle east peace process. Conversely, we are disappointed by the serious tension in the relationship between India and Pakistan, especially over Kashmir, which, as we saw in the Kargil incident last year, could easily become a flash-point for a nuclear exchange. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North was right about that. We shall do all that we can to seek an improvement in that situation, while pressing India and Pakistan to sign the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty and to participate constructively in negotiations for a fissile material cut-off treaty.

The United Kingdom is in a particularly good position to press the case for those treaties. We have not carried out a nuclear weapons test explosion since 1991. With France, we have not only signed but ratified the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. In 1995, we announced that we had ceased producing fissile material for nuclear weapons. The Government have already placed under international verification the reprocessing and enrichment operations that must be verified under any fissile material cut-off treaty. In short, we are practising what we preach.

Because of the importance that we attach to the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty, we have made no secret of our extreme disappointment that the US Senate has rejected it. We very much welcome the

Administration's refusal to accept that as the last word on the matter, and we shall continue to press for US ratification as soon as possible, along with ratification by Russia, China and all the other states whose ratification is essential to the treaty's coming into force. Similarly, at the conference on disarmament in Geneva, we are continuing to press for an early start to negotiations on a fissile material cut-off treaty.

We shall work hard in the next few months to prepare for the conference of states that are party to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in April and May. That treaty remains the cornerstone of international efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The vast majority of its parties remain fully committed to it. We agree with many of the non-nuclear weapon states that are also party to the treaty that want to push for faster progress towards nuclear disarmament. Here, too, the Government are practising what they preach.

I welcome the acknowledgment of the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) of the sea change that has been brought about by the new Labour Government on such matters. Since the end of the cold war, we have reduced the number of our operationally available warheads by 50 per cent. We have taken steps to maintain our remaining nuclear forces at a reduced state of readiness. We have been completely transparent about our stocks of nuclear material, military as well as civil. Work is in hand to develop expertise at Aldermaston in verifying the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons, and we have made it clear that, when we are satisified with progress towards our goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons, we will ensure that British nuclear weapons are included in those negotiations.

We have been trying to lead by example and our diplomats have been active and creative in trying to persuade other nuclear weapons states of the need for continuing progress in the right direction. The crucial issue is the future of the strategic arms reduction treaty process and the anti-ballistic missile treaty. There is a potential conflict of interests between two important considerations. On the one hand is the desirability of limiting defences against strategic ballistic missiles to provide the basis for continuing reductions in offensive, strategic nuclear forces. On the other hand is the possibility of defences against such missiles offering some protection against the consequences of their acquisition by new or rogue states that do not form part of established deterrent relationships. Such matters are complex and difficult, but I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Central and for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) about the dangers of unilateral responses to rogue states becoming a universal risk to humankind.

The Government, therefore, much welcome the fact that the United States and Russia announced in June last year that they would begin discussions on a third strategic arms reduction treaty and the anti-ballistic missile treaty. We welcome the fact that such discussions have been proceeding intensively during the past few months and look forward to a satisfactory conclusion. We are also looking forward to engaging fully with our NATO allies in the review of alliance policy options on confidence and security-building measures, verification, non-proliferation, and arms control and disarmament. The alliance committed itself to that exercise at the Washington summit in April last year. That process is now being undertaken by responsible NATO bodies and we expect a report to NATO Ministers in December this year. Although we do not believe that the review should lead to fundamental changes in NATO's new strategic concept announced at the Washington summit, we hope that it will make a helpful and positive contribution to the way forward in such important arms control areas.

The Government are working extremely hard not only to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, but to make progress towards our goal of the elimination of all such weapons. Ultimately, the achievement of both objectives is essential to long-term global security. Neither will be fully achieved without the other. In that respect, I very much welcome the setting up of the all-party group on such matters that is sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, North. I welcome also the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley has taken up the mantle that her husband pursued extremely vigorously over his years in Parliament. It is good to have such a voice heard loud and clear.

There is almost universal agreement in the House, apart from some elements on the Opposition Benches, about a united and vigorous response by the Government to try to tackle the problems of global insecurity and the need to ensure that we have proper controls on the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. There is a great deal more to do, however, and we must work together to achieve such an outcome. The work is hard and tough but, as I have tried to demonstrate, the Government are pursuing such a mandate with great vigour, certainly with much more energy and diligence than that displayed by our predecessors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central said, it is important that we carry on the agenda and achieve a much safer world and, thereby, eliminate the possibility of the whole of humankind destroying itself and, with it, the environment and the very future of the planet.

Private Swimming Pools

11.30 am

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): The matter that I wish to raise today is not only of great interest to people in my constituency of South-East Cornwall; it is of great relevance to people throughout the United Kingdom who holiday in this country.

Last summer, at Honicombe Manor holiday park, near Callington in my constituency, two young girls tragically drowned in the privately owned swimming pool at the holiday centre. The coroner's report, issued two weeks ago, was most distressing because it revealed that, had the pool complied with the guidelines set out by the Health and Safety Executive, the deaths could have been avoided. The pool was not supervised by a lifeguard; there was no emergency alarm or poolside telephone; and the pool shelved rapidly to a deep section that was not properly signposted. All those factors go against the guidelines and recommendations set out in "Managing Health and Safety in Swimming Pools"—a document recently updated by the Health and Safety Executive and the Sports Council of England, which I wholeheartedly commend and endorse.

I bring the matter to the House of Commons today in the hope that something can be done to ensure that accidents such as that latest tragedy do not happen again. The problem with private swimming pools—for the purposes of our debate, I mean pools in hotels, camp sites, self-catering complexes and similar establishments, but not domestic pools—is that they are not subject to the demands of specific regulations. They need comply only with the provisions of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, which states that their owners should accept a duty of care. As I said, guidelines exist on how to do that; they are good and comprehensive, but they are little more than suggestions of how best to meet the health and safety at work regulations. They contain few specific requirements and, if the guidelines are not heeded, pool owners and operators face little threat of disadvantage.

Local authorities have the power to issue orders for improvement, or prohibition orders. However, as illustrated by the case in my constituency, those orders are not always heeded, and the system of checks is not as rigorous as necessary. In light of the number of accidents that have occurred in such facilities, that cannot be allowed to continue.

The coroner at the inquest in the Honicombe Manor case has, in recent years, presided over inquests into seven deaths in holiday industry pools in Cornwall. Statistics prepared by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents show that the number of drownings in private pools has been worryingly high for a number of years. Of most concern is the fact that, although the number of accidents in public pools has fallen, the number of accidents in private pools has not. In 1998, the number of deaths in private pools was more than double the number of deaths in public pools. That illustrates the fact that, if the new guidelines were rigorously enforced in private pools, as they are in municipal pools, lives would be saved.

Surely it is time to take the advice of the coroner, who said that

"there is no system of licensing of holiday pools and there is because of the wide range of other duties a limited expertise available to the inspecting authority".

He recommended the introduction of a licence for pools to be granted or withdrawn on satisfactory inspection of the implementation of guidelines. I understand that he has written to the Government and, in the light of his experience, I hope that his words will be heeded.

The vast majority of those who operate private pools do so responsibly and ensure that the design and future operation of their facilities meet all the safety standards. However, we need to ensure that all pools meet the minimum standards and can be taken out of action immediately if they are found to be substandard. I should stress that I intend to call for such legislation.

My constituency has a thriving tourism industry, so I do not wish to make it more costly or difficult for holiday complex owners to provide leisure facilities. My constituency is also on the coast, so I am only too aware that the number of deaths in swimming pools is tiny compared with the number of deaths in rivers and the sea. I do not want to discourage the use of swimming pools, as it is enjoyable and valuable.

We want our children to learn to swim and to become strong swimmers by swimming regularly, and pools are the safest places for them to do that. However, they are safe only if the pools are properly supervised, if there are clear markings to show where unconfident swimmers can swim within their depth and if there is a clear action plan for when things go wrong, as they sometimes do, albeit rarely. We must also remember that many schools use local private pools for swimming lessons.

The fact that other swimming areas are more dangerous is no excuse for inaction. I fully accept that there will always be risks attached to leisure pursuits involving water. Simple, relatively inexpensive precautions should be taken, however, to ensure greater safety in private swiming pools.

The guidelines issued by the Health and Safety Executive are extremely well thought out. Although they recognise that not all swimming pools will meet top standards at all times, they give clear, sensible guidance on how to minimise risk. We must ensure that the guidelines are properly implemented. Had they been, I am certain that there would not have been a pool with a sharp and badly signposted shelf to a deep section, no poolside alarm and no lifeguard, although not all those might have been realistically available while a small holiday business maintained commercial viability. Had the recommended system been in place, however, the pool would not have been granted a licence until a least its gradient had been lowered and a trained and qualified specialist health and safety inspector had outlined and approved a clear emergency plan.

Several problems relate specifically to swimming pools. We are all aware that swimming pool design and installation differ from what existed a few years ago. We are aware of recent cases in which hair has been trapped in filter systems, injuries have resulted from poorly designed water slides and flumes, and accidents have been caused by poor layout such as low-level overhead pipes. We have also heard about more common problems, such as bad signing of deep areas, sharp

shelves into deep water and slippery poolside surfaces. We need properly qualified people who are trained specifically to spot those potential problems and enforce recommendations at design stage and when the pool is commissioned for use. Such a regime would not be difficult to implement. Existing environmental health officers need to be qualified in the specialist subject of swimming pool safety.

The vast majority of our swimming pools are as safe as we can make them: it is the others that we must tackle. Even the worst pools are less hazardous than the open sea, but there is room for improvement. When we are dealing with people's safety, we should not delay taking every possible step towards improvement. There is always a cost to increasing regulation. We must bear in mind the fact that, often, only limited resources are available to small holiday complex owners and indeed, local authorities. However, I am sure that all holiday complex owners want to provide safer facilities for their customers.

My aim in suggesting a licensing programme is to encourage a more proactive approach to swimming pool safety, in both their construction and the organisation of their use, than the current system of orders to improve and prohibition orders, which, by their nature, are reactive. If pool owners knew that they had to meet minimum standards before being allowed to open their facilities, best practice would be encouraged from the outset. That would be especially effective in encouraging better swimming pool design, which has been identified by ROSPA as one of the chief sources of danger in such swimming pools. It would involve considerable collaboration between the agency responsible for inspection and the planning authorities, but I do not see that as an insurmountable barrier.

The Health and Safety Executive takes seriously the dangers that can be associated with swimming pools and has, in response to previous cases, commissioned inspections of pools. Unfortunately, when the personnel sent to carry out those inspections are not qualified specialists and the immediate threat of a loss of licence is not a possibility, there will always be some irresponsible owners who do not take the action necessary to comply with the best practice as laid out.

I have spoken to the local council involved in my constituency and it has expressed its support for a scheme of licences. Furthermore, in a recent letter to me the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management recognised a

"clear need to do more"

than is done at present. I believe that those endorsements show willingness by the industry to move forward to safer regulation, and as I have mentioned, the coroner is calling for that approach too.

To summarise, I am not convinced that the duty of care requirement as created in the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 is specific enough to deal with the particular problems associated with private swimming pools. Most establishments in the holiday industry require adherence to strict safety precautions in relation to fire. Fire certification has dramatically improved consumer safety in hotel accommodation. It is time to introduce similar measures for swimming pools.

We should have a stronger system of licensing starting at the design stage so that safety features could be designed in at an appropriate time. It should follow through to the commissioning stage so that a pool is constructed in the way it should be. Pools should be subjected to regular inspection, whether yearly, two yearly or three yearly, with the possible addition of spot checks. There should also be enforcement powers to close down a facility if necessary. Such a regime is called for by the coroner and my local authority and is supported by the professional institution. I ask the Minister to consider these representations seriously so that we reduce the incidence of these tragic accidents.

11.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): It is a pleasure to respond to my first debate in this Chamber under your supervision, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) on securing this debate. I should also like to tell him how sorry I am about the tragic incident that occurred in his constituency in which two young people from, I believe, the north-west lost their lives—[*Interruption.*] I apologise if that was incorrect. My sympathy goes genuinely to the families who have suffered such an appalling loss.

According to figures produced by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, there are about 10 to 12 fatal accidents in swimming pools each year. Any drowning is a significant tragedy. At least some of that albeit small number of deaths in swimming pools could have been prevented by pool operators taking greater precautions, by bathers exercising more care, or by a combination of both. There has been an apparent blip in the figures this year, showing that a larger proportion of the annual fatalities has happened in private pools. That blip does not affect the trend over recent years, when fatalities in both private and public pools have been more or less the same.

I know that the number of deaths is very small compared with the number of people who use pools, but that is of little consolation to those who have lost family members. I fully appreciate that, and accept the view that any fatality is a tragedy. Statistically speaking, swimming pools are relatively safe. The number of fatalities is very low compared with the estimated 7 million people a year who use them, and the benefits of swimming far outweigh those risks. Swimming pools have been proven to be far safer places to swim than open water, which claims about 400 lives a year.

As the hon. Gentleman will know from his area, in recent years there has been a steady increase in the number of people taking holidays in the United Kingdom. People enjoy an increasing amount of leisure time, and the number of people using swimming pools—especially private pools in hotels and holiday camps—has increased. The Health and Safety Executive is aware of that phenomenon and has taken steps to ensure that the increase in the number of pools and users does not cause unnecessary hazards. The HSE has tried to work closely with industry representatives, local authorities and sports councils to ensure that the best possible advice is available to those responsible for running swimming pools.

We must ensure that pool operators and users take health and safety issues seriously. Pool operators should be aiming for the highest levels of safety, which

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would benefit them as more people were encouraged to enjoy the benefits of swimming in a safe, well-run swimming pool. To help those involved in running pools to focus on what is needed to operate a safe pool, the Government and the Health and Safety Commission have put in place a robust and rigorous regime, which we believe has been instrumental in keeping fatalities in swimming pools at a very low level. That has been achieved through a goal-setting legislative approach, the production of detailed guidance, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, and, where necessary, proportionate enforcement action.

I shall say a little about the various elements of that regime. Legislation applies to swimming pools only when a work activity takes place; it does not apply to private pools in people's homes. The legislation applies to public pools and those in holiday camps, hotels and private health clubs. There is no specific legislation, but the Health and Safety Commission and Executive use the provisions in sections 2 and 3 of the Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974, and supporting legislation. Under section 2, pool managers have a duty to protect people working for them; under section 3, they must ensure that their work activity and that of their employees—the provision of swimming facilities—does not cause harm to others, such as pool users or those who have access to the swimming pool. There is a clear locus of responsibility relating to swimming facilities and pool users.

More specifically, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers and pool operators to undertake an assessment of the significant risks involved in their work activity and to identify and put in place the control measures necessary to ensure that the risk of harm is minimised so far as is reasonably practicable. To help pool operators to comply with their duties under that legislation, the Health and Safety Commission, together with Sport England, published the revised guidance to which the hon. Gentleman referred, "Managing Health and Safety in Swimming Pools". The new publication was produced to replace the previous guidance "Safety in Swimming Pools", which had also been jointly prepared by the HSC and Sport England in 1988. It was revised to take account of the requirements of health and safety legislation that had been introduced since then, including the 1999 regulations and the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992, which make explicit many of the general duties that were set out in the original Act, such as maintenance of the workplace and of equipment, devices and systems.

Mr. Breed: Does the Minister agree that all those regulations are, as I said, largely reactive? They are made after contraventions have occurred, rather than being in place in the first place.

Ms Hughes: I certainly agree that, under the current regime, the onus is on the pool operator to ensure that he or she has undertaken a risk assessment and put in place the measures that that assessment identified as necessary to minimise risk. That is where the primary responsibility lies. There is also a responsibility on local authorities to inspect pools and enforce the provisions of the guidance. Together, those two loci of responsibility offer a robust regime which, in the vast majority of circumstances, ensures safety to a standard which, as I said, achieves a very low incidence of accidents and fatalities.

The revision of the guidance presented an opportunity for the HSE to respond to requests from the industry to incorporate other changes that would take account of technological advances in equipment, training methods and so on. To pick up on another point that the hon. Gentleman raised, the revision takes account of the experiences not just of those who use swimming pools, but of managers, inspectors, designers, architects, manufacturers and builders. There is a huge push from the industry as well as from the Government and local authorities to design and build in safety for swimming pools in the way that the hon. Gentleman advocated.

The guidance has maintained a consistently high profile over the year since its publication. It is recognised as independent and was constructed with the input of representatives from the public and private sectors, consumer interest groups and other professional bodies. The HSE and the HSC believe that it has been effective in raising awareness of the many hazards associated with the preparation and use of swimming pools and, as a consequence, has contributed to the reduction in swimming pool fatalities.

Like its predecessor, the new guidance was widely welcomed in all sectors of the industry. Our evidence from pool operators who have taken it up is that they have taken on board the need to incorporate it in their practice. If pool operators follow the advice that it gives, they will have gone a long way towards preventing a further loss of life. I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts that the rigour and robustness of the guidance—if it is followed—should ensure very high standards of safety.

Most privately owned pools in the UK fall under the responsibility of the local authorities that enforce health and safety law on behalf of the HSE—although, as the hon. Gentleman will know, if a local authority owns the pool, the HSE is the enforcing authority. As the risk of serious harm as a result of a visit to a swimming pool is quite remote, the frequency of health and safety inspections is based on available resources and other priorities, based on levels of risk. None the less, the strategy for 1999–2002 devised by the HSE and the local authority enforcement liaison committee, the joint committee that considers such matters, includes as a key indicator and an objective for local authorities a reduction in incidents in swimming pools. Evidence clearly suggests that the HSE and local authorities are aware that the regime's robustness depends partly on enforcement and inspection, and have made it their objective to ensure, through enforcement and inspection, a reduction in incidents. They aim to achieve that through the promotion of the recently published guidance and by raising awareness of specific health and safety risks so that pool operators can take the steps necessary to reduce the risk of an incident happening in their pool.

Under the existing legislative framework, using a goal-setting approach and with the involvement of industry in the production of guidance, the HSE has been able to ensure that a template is available for pool

operators to reduce further the number of fatalities in swimming pools. That, coupled with enforcement action where necessary, provides a structured and balanced approach to ensure safety. It is through that overall approach to managing health and safety in swimming pools that the HSE has managed, it would argue, to obviate the need for sector-specific regulation, which might, arguably, merely duplicate existing requirements in more general health and safety legislation, and, therefore, as the hon. Gentleman intimated, make it more difficult for businesses and local authorities to provide facilities for people to learn and enjoy the benefits of swimming. We must remember that it is the responsibility of pool operators to ensure that they have done everything reasonably practicable to reduce the risk of harm to people in their pools through either working or bathing.

Mr. Breed: Is the Minister confident that the people who are asked to carry out the inspections on behalf of the HSE are properly trained and qualified? Unfortunately, it seems that, in this case, the main problem was missed twice. No formal qualifications seem to be involved in the inspection of the health and safety aspect of swimming pools.

Ms Hughes: As the hon. Gentleman will understand, I cannot comment on that particular case. I do not know all the details, and, in any case, the district council may take further legal action. Presumably he is questioning me about whether local authority inspectors are competent. In researching the matter for the debate, I have found no evidence to suggest that local authority inspectors in general are not competent. Local authorities make an effort to ensure that inspectors have specific training when they make inspections. If the issue should arise in a particular case, we shall consider it.

The hon. Gentleman proposed that the Department consider the coroner's recommendation, which is, if I understand him correctly, for a more proactive licensing regime, as opposed to the current regime, in which responsibility lies with the operator to conduct a risk assessment, followed by an inspection of that risk assessment and of the measures that it identifies, together with any necessary enforcement action. Taking the picture in the round, I cannot assure him that a system of licensing would be considered the best way forward. However, I assure him that if the coroner, or anyone else, makes such representations to us, we will look at them in detail and consider them thoroughly. We will not just dismiss them out of hand. I hope that that is sufficient for him at the moment.

Clyde Shipbuilding

12 noon

Mr. Mohammad Sarwar (Glasgow, Govan): I am very grateful for this opportunity to debate the important issue of the future of shipbuilidng on the river Clyde. I also thank my colleagues for their support and attendance today, demonstrating the importance of the industry to their constituents and to our country.

Shipbuilding has a proud history on the Clyde. The industry was a dominant force in Scottish manufacturing and a major producer in the world market. Britain's empire and wealth was based on the Clyde yards, as pioneers of innovation and shipbuilders of quality.

As much as one sixth of the world's shipping was launched from Clydeside berths in 1913. Significant competitive pressures since then have led to a decline in the role of Scottish shipbuilding in both the world market and as a force in our economy. From employing around 60,000 in the 1950s, Scotland's shipbuilding work force now employs around 10,000.

Production in Scotland is largely dominated by four yards based on the Clyde: Govan and Yarrow on the upper Clyde; Ferguson's on the lower Clyde at Port Glasgow; and Ailsa Troon on the Ayrshire coast.

Govan is the largest builder of merchant ships in the United Kingdom. The yard has of late specialised in the design and build of large, sophisticated gas and chemical carriers, as well as specialist, one-off vessels for a wide range of uses. Yarrow is the largest shipbuilder in Scotland. The yard has fully covered facilities for building both steel-reinforced and glass-reinforced plastic vessels and has dry dock facilities. It also has an advanced 3-d design capability. The shipyard specialises in the design and build of naval vessels for the Royal Navy and overseas navies.

Of the two smaller shipyards, Ferguson's has developed a market in building small ferries, such as platform supply vessels for the oil industry. Ailsa Troon has only recently re-entered the shipbuilding market, having for some years specialised in marine fabrications, and ship and boat repair work. The hallmark of all four yards is the Clyde-built quality, which sets the Scottish industry apart from its competitors.

My involvement and focus are very much on the Govan shipyard in my constituency. As the local Member of Parliament, I have shared the roller-coaster ride of the past year with the dedicated and skilled work force and their families. My constituents value the former Fairfields yard as the major employer in Govan. Following the announcement last April that the Kvaerner group were seeking to sell or close the yard, the Government worked hard to secure a buyer for Govan. In particular, I must praise the efforts of the task force led by Sir Gavin Laird and by hon. Members for pulling together in support of the Govan workers who reside in constituencies across Scotland.

I must also praise the success of my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Scotland in securing the deal that saw the yard transfer to GEC Marconi, now part of BAe Systems. The Scotland Office, the new Scottish Executive and Members of the House and of the new Scottish Parliament have all shown by working in

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partnership to secure and promote the Govan yard, that Scotland benefits from bringing government closer to the people.

Will the Minister provide reassurance that the Government's sympathetic approach to the shipbuilding industry—which he initiated when in the former Scottish Office—will continue, given its importance to Scotland and the United Kingdom? The shipbuilding regulation adopted by the European Union in 1998 aims to refuse aid on measures to help the industry to improve its competitiveness. The United States delay in ratifying the 1994 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development shipping agreement means that yards on the Clyde are vulnerable to uncompetitive pricing practices elsewhere. Regular discussions with Govan shop stewards, led by yard convener Jamie Webster, show that that is a major concern for the Govan yard.

Last year, the European Commission report on world shipbuilding outlined low pricing by yards—especially those in Korea—which sometimes resulted in losses between 14 and 40 per cent. of the calculated building price. After recent difficulties in the far eastern economies, there are genuine concerns that International Monetary Fund-led rescue packages may allow heavily subsidised Korean yards facing bankruptcy to continue to trade at a loss.

I urge the Minister and the Government to continue to investigate whether the conditions and assumptions under which the IMF made the Korean rescue packages are fully respected. It is vital that the Government identify enough evidence of anti-competitive behaviour in Korea so that the World Trade Organisation can take measures to rectify the position. In addition, I urge the Government to continue to help to establish international trade disciplines for a level playing field in world shipbuilding.

The shipbuilding intervention fund will not be available from the end of this year. At present, that operating aid allows British merchant yards to subsidise up to 9 per cent. of the contract value at the time of signing the contract. I fully understand Govan's concern at that decision, but appreciate that such aid has not always helped shipbuilding competitiveness across the European Union.

Last week, the enterprise Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive released £2.7 million in intervention aid for Harland and Wolff in Belfast. As in Scotland, the new devolved Administration has continued the UK Government's active support for the shipbuilding industry. Workers on the Clyde seek Government assurances that any remaining opportunities for such aid this year will not be ignored anywhere in the United Kingdom.

The home shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme currently provides loans to finance the construction, completion or radical alteration of ships and mobile offshore installations. At present, guaranteed loans are available for up to 80 per cent. of contract value for ships and up to 85 per cent. of contract value for mobile offshore installations, such as rigs. Will the Minister outline the perceived extent of its success and whether proposals for altering or improving the scheme are likely?

In Europe, the Council regulation abolishing contract-related aid at the end of this year permits measures to improve the competitiveness of shipbuilding through capacity reductions or productivity increases. On Clydeside, we especially welcome research and development aid and investment aid for innovation. James Watt developed practical steam power on the Clyde, and Govan yard owners Napier, Elder and Kirk pioneered engine innovations that dominated marine engineering for decades. Napier, the father of Clyde shipbuilding, built the first iron ships for the British Navy in Govan. Our proud heritage is matched by a determination to maintain the Clyde's reputation at the cutting edge of the industry in the new millennium.

In Europe, the Industry Council has concentrated on heavy industry, such as shipbuilding and steel, with the emphasis on state aid. With the European Union aid regime moving towards horizontal aid and away from aid for specific sectors, I must impress on my hon. Friend the Minister the need to ensure that the shipbuilding industry is not moved down the agenda and sidelined in future meetings of the Industry Council. My hon. Friend the Minister supported the formation of a shipbuilding forum, comprising representatives of yards, unions, suppliers and customers, to increase British yards' share of EU ship purchases. That partnership approach is widely welcome for Scotland and the United Kingdom. A united industry will always be stronger pursuing common interests, and I praise the commitment of the Labour Government in initiating and continuing that strategy.

On the Clyde, we welcomed the confirmation, by the Minister for Defence Procurement in November, that Yarrow would be the prime contractor for the new type 42 destroyers. An initial contract has been let with BAe Systems to carry out studies on the programme. It is hoped that the BAe Systems partnership of Govan and Yarrow will reap further benefits in future work.

The Defence Procurement Agency's pending decision on roll-on, roll-off vessels is of immediate concern to Govan, as a shipbuilder, and its sister yard, Yarrow, as an outfitter. Govan leads the Sealion consortium bid for six ro-ro ferries, each worth £35 million in a public-private partnership initiative for the Ministry of Defence. Those vessels will have strategic sealift capability to transport equipment for the new joint rapid reaction force. They are not warships, but ro-ros of a commercial build owned by the service provider. The MOD has learned in the past that it cannot rely on commercial shipping to provide ro-ros at short notice or value for money.

On Friday 14 January, the deadline for final ro-ro bids, the Secretary of State for Scotland visited the Govan yard, underlining his recognition of the importance that such a contract could play in the yard's future. The First Minister and the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning have expressed the Scottish Executive's total support for the bid. Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament are united in support of Govan. We all fully appreciate that the Defence Procurement Agency will follow proper procedures in awarding the contract, and that a decision will be made that benefits the taxpayer and the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, I am confident that the Clyde-built quality of Govan will prove most

competitive. Shop stewards at the yard believe that a successful bid would guarantee work for the next five years and could increase the work force by 200. It could allow up to 20 apprentices to be taken on for the first time in three years.

In recent years, HMS Ocean was built in Govan, taking advantage of our commercial build methods and facilities. That amphibious helicopter carrier's primary role is to carry an embarked military force with support. Her secondary roles include afloat training, a limited anti-submarine warfare platform and a base for anti-terrorist operations. HMS Ocean is a typically excellent example of the Clyde-built quality of Govan.

The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), in a previous life as Secretary of State for Defence, awarded two MOD contracts for auxiliary oilers to VSEL at Barrow, despite a strong bid from the then Kvaerner Govan. The second oiler has now been subcontracted to BAe Systems Govan. The first oiler remains at the new sister yard in Barrow, several months overdue at a yard renowned for its submarine work. The MOD has recently improved its use of the smart procurement scheme, which was launched in the strategic defence review. Savings can now be made without sacrificing the quality of work in present and future builds for the MOD by United Kingdom shipbuilders.

Without the ro-ro order, the Govan yard could again face closure next January. The competition for that contract will be strong. Among the shortlist of four bidders, the Dutch company Maersk is keen to use Cammell Laird on Tyneside. That facility was reopened recently by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, but it is unlikely to be operational for well over a year. Understandably, my right hon. Friend is keen to see the return of shipbuilding to Tyneside whose shipbuilding tradition is second only to that on Clydeside.

I remain confident, however, that the yard in my constituency will meet the challenge of any competition and successfully secure such a vital order. The Govan shipyard has a reputation for high-quality work that is produced on time and to budget. With the active support of the Government on the British and world stage, Clydeside shipyards have a real future. I urge the Minister to reaffirm the Government's continuing support for shipbuilding on the Clyde.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I shall not call the hon. Lady to speak. She has not informed me that she has received the permission of the hon. Member who initiated the debate to do so. She has not notified me of her wish to speak, nor am I sure that she has notified the Minister. Has the hon. Lady followed all those three traditions?

Mrs. Fyfe: No, I have not. However, in an earlier debate this morning, hon. Members were asked whether they wanted to speak. I did not realise that the rules were being applied so rigidly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I must explain that the earlier debate was a long Adjournment debate, not a half-hour Adjournment debate for which the rules are different.

12.15 pm

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Govan (Mr. Sarwar) on securing the Adjournment debate. It is a useful vehicle by which to raise an issue that affects his constituency in particular, but also one to bring attention to the wider subject of Clyde shipbuilding. I note with satisfaction the strong turnout of our Labour colleagues to the debate; it is a clear sign of the strength of feeling and interest of those who are committed to Clyde shipbuilding. However, I hope I shall not be considered ungracious. I note also that a Tory Member is present in this Chamber, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Mrs. Laing). She is very welcome—but no one else is.

My hon. Friend was good enough to recognise that, when I was Minister responsible for education and industry in the Scottish Office, I was able to demonstrate my commitment to Clyde shipbuilding in a practical way. As he rightly said, since 1997 there has been much evidence of the Government's commitment to the shipbuilding industry in general, and Clyde shipbuilding in particular, and to reversing any misguided thoughts about the industry being one that could be left to its own devices or that it was somehow part of an industrial past. It is very much part of our industrial future. The title of the debate "Shipbuilding on the Clyde" is certainly emotive; it carries with it images and memories of great achievements and huge work forces with legendary skills.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Govan said, for some 35 years about 60,000 people were employed building ships on the Clyde. Today, the work force is about one twentieth of that figure. Although the scale is different, the Labour Government strongly believe in Clyde shipbuilding as a modern industry with an important future. I know that Ministers in the Scottish Executive are of a similar disposition. At the instigation of the trade unions, I put in motion the establishment of a Scottish shipbuilding forum that is now chaired by the Scottish Executive. It will provide an on-going and valuable focal point for the sharing of information and the promotion of the interests of the entire industry.

There is nothing old-fashioned about shipbuilding. We have only to go to the yard in my hon. Friend's constituency to understand that fully. Today's industry is high-tech; it needs a strong skills base. Some of the skills may have changed, but modern computer skills are as important as some of the more traditional shipbuilding skills. Modern shipbuilding is also about delivering a quality product on time and to budget. On that basis, I have every confidence that "Clyde-built" can remain a hallmark of quality manufacturing throughout the 21st century.

The Secretary of State for Scotland was closely involved in securing a deal for Govan last year, following the decision by Kvaerner to pull out of shipbuilding. It is worth emphasising that Kvaerner's decision was not solely about Govan, but about shipbuilding as a whole. My right hon. Friend was impressed by the fact, which I know from my own

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contact with the yard to be true, that the work force at Govan adapted superbly to change. They are flexible and fully aware of the current climate, which is recognised and welcomed by the new management at Govan—BAe Systems. We all recognise the modern reality that shipbuilding is a fiercely competitive global industry with many players in the market. The world shipbuilding industry is in a critical condition with capacity far exceeding demand for new vessels.

My hon. Friend the Member for Govan mentioned subsidies for shipbuilding in the far east, particularly Korea—a timely reminder of this long-standing problem. I can assure him that the Government share the industry's concern about unfair trade practices by Korea and other low-cost Asian shipbuilders. We are a leading advocate within the European Union and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development of promoting effective international disciplines to deal with unfair trading practices.

At the timely November Industry Council, we achieved a successful conclusion whereby the Council agreed measures to combat Korean unfair trade practices. The Commission and member states have started to implement those measures. At the same time, we urged the industry to play its part in taking those actions forward. It is important that a clear World Trade Organisation anti-subsidy case against Korea was presented to the Commission, which is now working closely with the industry to establish whether there is enough evidence to lodge a complaint. We shall be keeping the pressure up ahead of the next bilateral talks between the Commission and Korea, which are scheduled for February. I can therefore assure my hon. Friend the Member for Govan that the Government recognise and are taking action to address the problems that he properly raised regarding Korea and other low-cost economies.

In my previous incarnation as Minister for Trade, I was firmly convinced that the best way to combat unfair trade practices was to establish international trade disciplines to which all must equally adhere. We have taken a leading role in advocating that both in the EU and the OECD. As my hon. Friend the Member for Govan mentioned, we have been frustrated in our efforts because of the failure of the United States to ratify the 1994 OECD shipbuilding agreement. Nevertheless, we shall continue to pursue those objectives and my hon. Friend can rest assured of the Government's intention to pursue a fair deal and the proverbial level playing field.

The key for shipbuilding, as for other UK industries, is to become even more competitive. The Government formed the shipbuilding forum—on a UK basis as well as a Scottish one—to facilitate that process. It is currently implementing 40 recommendations, including enhanced support for the shipbuilding industry. The Department of Trade and Industry has agreed to allow an element of profit in shipbuilding intervention fund calculations, has extended the role of the shipbuilding intervention fund to conversion contracts and has extended access to several previously excluded yards. The home shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme has been improved by allowing contracts offering pure cover and by allowing US dollar and euro financing. My hon. Friend the Minister for Trade has expressed his determination to ensure that any outstanding forum recommendations are implemented.

The shipbuilding intervention fund, though helpful, has not delivered the improvements that it promised in the industry's competitiveness. We are monitoring the pressure around Europe to continue the current system of contract aid, such as the shipbuilding intervention fund, but we are not convinced that it is the best way forward. New shipbuilding regulations, which came into force last year, refocus support for the industry on measures that will improve its competitiveness. To that end, we shall pursue the new EU regulations. The net effect should be to give shipbuilding more focused support to guarantee that our shipbuilders are not disadvantaged. The key is to win orders in the globally competitive marketplace, which, as we all know, means delivering ships on time and to the quality that everyone expects from the Clyde and for which it is rightly famed.

For the larger United Kingdom shipbuilders such as Govan, winning orders means, as my hon. Friend said, being especially successful at winning Ministry of Defence contracts. He spoke about the roll-on, roll-off ferry contract, which I understand will be determined by July, and the preferred bidder is likely to be named in the spring. As he recognised, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland visited the Govan yard last Friday to reinforce our political commitment to its future. I am delighted that the unions are at Westminster today, pressing the case with Baroness Symons at the Ministry of Defence, but the roll-on, roll-off ferry contract will be determined in accordance with the clear rules that the Ministry operates for contracts of that size and nature. It is only right that it is so, but I know that the Ministry will carefully consider every aspect of the bids.

The same applies to all the other contracts in the pipeline for the Ministry of Defence, such as coastal survey vessels, alternative landing support logistics, type 45 destroyers and a future aircraft carrier. Clyde yards will figure prominently, and there will be debates here and elsewhere in which their case will be forcefully made.

The hon. Gentleman has concentrated on the yard in his own constituency, as one would expect, but it is important to recognise the success of the yards at Fergusons, Ailsa and Yarrow at winning orders. We will give them our support in the future, as in the past. I emphasise that the Government believe in shipbuilding. We believe that the industry, especially in terms of its Scottish interests, was unnecessarily decimated during the mad-dog days of the 1980s when it was fashionable to write off industries as being sunset when all reality suggested that they should be maintained on strategic economic grounds to help secure our economic future.

I am grateful that the debate has allowed me the opportunity, on behalf of the Scotland Office and the Government, to salute those who work and have worked in shipbuilding on the Clyde. They have built ships in which we as Britons and, in some cases, Scots and Glaswegians, can take pride. They have also championed the rights of workers in a way that has left its mark on industrial relations to this day. I hope that the Government's industrial relations agenda, especially the right to trade union recognition which will soon be

introduced, can to some extent be regarded as a monument to the efforts of previous generations of shipyard workers on the Clyde. They worked for such objectives as well as for retaining their jobs and industry.

I shall reaffirm what I said at the outset. The Government recognise the importance of the Clyde's shipbuilding industry. We have done everything that we can to support it, and we will work closely with my hon. Friend, our friends in the trade union movement and the management of the yards to achieve the best outcome possible.

Telecommunication Masts

12.30 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): As we all know, the mobile telecommunications industry is booming. By next year, it is expected that the number of mobile telephone subscribers will exceed 20 million. By the end of the decade, that figure could be nearly doubled. I support that growth; it is part of the communications revolution that is helping to sustain our economy in a uniquely long growth cycle, as it has done in the United States of America. However, that massive and rapid growth has thrown up a series of questions about how it can be accommodated without spoiling the environment which it is our duty to protect and enhance before we pass it on to our heirs.

Health risks associated with microwave radiation remain a matter of controversy. Today, however, I want to focus on the visual environment. The establishment of unsightly masts, which support more than a third of telecommunication base stations, is growing at an alarming rate throughout the country. No one seems to know exactly how many masts there are. If my constituency is anything to go by, there must be more than 10,000, and we are promised a doubling of their number despite the present 98 per cent. coverage, due to capacity increase and new technology.

The masts are invariably eyesores; they are an awful imposition on the surrounding landscape. Time and again in my constituency, masts have been erected in places where their towering existence has had a serious impact on people's quiet enjoyment of their environment and the surrounding scenery. My case files attest to the fact that they have become a permanent blight on the lives of those who live nearby.

The planning regulations have promoted rapid development at the expense of environmental concerns. Regulations have been drafted to assist mobile telephone companies, but those regulations have been aggressively exploited in order to build new masts. In my constituency, the actions of Orange have been an exemplar of corporate insensitivity, as they have repeatedly overridden the strong objections of local residents and local councils.

Now that the networks are largely completed, the planning process must be rebalanced in favour of the environment rather than unimpeded commercial development. As the Minister knows, planning policy guidance 8 is central to the planning process. Such is the guidance given in PPG8 that, even if masts are subject to the planning process, the final result is nearly always in favour of development. That guidance must be rewritten. Other regulations, too, should be examined so that it is no longer acceptable for masts to be built willy-nilly in the green belt or in conservation areas. All new masts for base stations should be subject to full planning permission.

Everyone agrees that base stations attached to existing buildings and structures are preferable. The refusal of owners of suitable sites to host a base station should therefore be investigated more closely if it is likely to lead to a mast development. We should also ask whether the operators have offered a suitable fee to the potential base station host. That economic test should include not only the cost of the alternative to a mast, but

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an allowance for the mast being an environmental offence, probably devaluing property and the quality of life of its neighbours for decades. If operators cannot satisfy the planning inspectorate that they have met those economic tests, permission for masts should be refused.

We must put in place every incentive to avoid mast development if other feasible technical solutions can be found. Masts should be the last option in a properly demonstrable sequential approach. Although I welcome the new mast database, information that I have gleaned from companies suggests that it is not yet working properly. With four networks, it is pathetic that only 30 per cent. of masts are shared. An average of one mast servicing two networks would be barely adequate. I asked the Director General of Telecommunications whether he intended to move to a robust target for mast sharing; I regret that his answer was no. I hope that he will think again before he issues his promised consultative document.

In making the case for tighter planning regulations for masts, I turn to an example in my constituency. Orange and Railtrack have abused the normal planning process in order to erect a 32m mast in a conservation area.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. Yesterday, I had a meeting in the village of Glenboig in my constituency involving the company One 2 One. I experienced the same difficulty as the hon. Gentleman. Does he agree that there should be far more consultation with local people? In my constituency there was none.

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's intervention, which demonstrates that the problem affects hundreds of constituencies where companies have not taken account of local concerns. Let me give a classic example.

Local residents and the local planning authority were eventually powerless to prevent the development of the 32m mast in a conservation area, as Railtrack was able to exploit the mast's exemption from the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995—part 24 being applicable to telecommunications developments—for the eventual commercial benefit of Orange, in a pre-arranged strategy. In July 1997, Railtrack unilaterally erected a 32m mast—higher than the company required—on a railway embankment off Nutley lane in Reigate, claiming the benefit of permitted development rights. This dominated a residential area and the Somers road conservation area. A storm of local protest led to a number of my constituents—notably Susie Garnier, Jill Campbell, David Tinn, Anne and Gordon Forest and others too numerous to mention—becoming unhappily expert in mast matters as they led local protests against the mast. The local authority was deeply unimpressed by Railtrack's use of its power under the order. It formally expressed deep disappointment, called the lack of notification to local residents "unacceptable" and was not convinced that a mast 32m high was required. The local authority concluded:

"Railtrack merely considered cost effectiveness and at no stage were the amenities of the locality or nearby residents taken into account."

Surprise, surprise! In March 1998 the local authority received an application from Orange to replace the Railtrack mast with a bigger, better—wider and more obtrusive—mast of its own. Had there been a commercial agreement that had influenced Railtrack's selection of the site and the erection and height of the mast and ancillary installation? Unfortunately for it, Orange's supporting statement to its application to replace the Railtrack mast is dated February 1997, six months before Railtrack put up its mast. That tells us the answer. Railtrack's actions in not invigilating Orange's plans for the replacement, which apparently formed part of a vital safety system, tell us what had gone on before the mast was put up.

The planning process then wound its predictable route. There was a further storm of local protest. Reigate and Banstead borough council refused Orange's application on the ground that the mast would be extremely prominent, and detrimental to the visual amenities of the surrounding area and, in particular, the conservation area. The inevitable appeal to the Planning Inspectorate followed. The inspector conscientiously did his duty. He visited the site accompanied by representatives of the company and the local ward councillor, Councillor Ann Milton, who had been actively representing local people's concerns to the local authority.

Entirely predictably, the planning inspector gave permission for the mast in October last year. A key consideration in his conclusion in allowing Orange's appeal was the pre-existence of Railtrack's mast and the fact that it would allow mast sharing between Railtrack and Orange. The case is clear: Orange and Railtrack combined to defeat the intentions of the planning process towards a high mast in a conservation area. Railtrack's action was an abuse of its rights. It claimed it as a vital safety system, but then seemed remarkably disinterested in the inaccuracies and inconsistencies in Orange's plans and failed to specify certain requested details with any clarity. Railtrack was not justified in claiming the benefit of permitted development rights but, to quote its own publicity material, this was a way to

"build on the partnerships we have development with some of the UK's major telecom companies to increase profitability."

Railtrack must now answer some questions, not least those put to it by Susie Garnier and Jill Campbell. What is the nature of the business and description of the business already developed, and about to be developed, with the telecom companies, utilising Railtrack's infrastructure? On how many occasions has Railtrack's use of permitted development rights been of advantage when selling access to its infrastructure? If Railtrack is not prepared to expose the nature of its relationship with the telecom companies, we are entitled to think that it is a racket, and the regulatory authorities should act accordingly in the public interest to withdraw and restrict Railtrack's rights.

That is not the only example of Orange's poor practice in my constituency. The code of best practice, introduced in 1996, regarding prior approval procedures for applied mast and tower development states:

"If the planning authority raises reasonable concerns and requests changes to the appearance, landscape of siting of the proposed installation, the operator will try to meet these requests where possible."

The code is intended to foster a co-operative approach, whereby the industry and its agents work closely together with local planning authorities and communities. Orange escaped from its legal obligations to accept minimal council requests to reduce the visual impact of a proposed mast at Shrimpsfield, Brighton road, Kingswood in an unseemly row over whether the council had met the 28-day deadline. We can see, therefore, how much respect Orange has for the opinion of local people. It is little surprise that the Gregorys, whose life has been blighted by the mast, report that the requested shrub cover is painfully thin and inadequate.

I recognise the efforts that have been made by other companies in recognition of the unsightliness of masts. For example, One 2 One has voluntarily ended its use of the 1995 order for future masts on greenfield sites when there is mast sharing. I have to admit my surprise that one company—Orange—seems to be the usual culprit in enraging local communities. When my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) learnt of this debate, he sent me a copy of his local paper, with the headline "Mast Fury". Again the culprit was Orange.

I largely accept the advice on the danger from radiation. However, on environmental grounds alone, the regulatory framework must be rebalanced now that operators have met the coverage targets set for them by the Government. A specific example is one that has arisen over a telecommunications mast in Banstead Woods in the Metropolitan green belt, which is an area of great landscape value, a site of special scientific interest and ancient woodland. However, for some reason, the woods are not classified as an area of outstanding natural beauty, even though they are certainly that. I hope that the Minister will agree with me and the Chipstead residents association that the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 should be amended to give areas such as Banstead Woods the same protection as areas of outstanding natural beauty.

I also look forward to Oftel's consultative document on mast sharing, which will be published this year, but I am concerned that there will be an absence of target-setting by the regulator. Planning obligations to secure mast sharing should be strengthened, but local communities must be sure that other base station sites have been tried and that proper offers are made to the owners of such sites, who can prevent an unnecessary mast from being erected.

I hope that there will be greater co-operation between the cellular operators and others to minimise the need for more masts to be erected. The operators tell us that we can expect twice as many masts in the future. That is not acceptable. The Minister must use her powers to protect communities from the telecommunications operators and the privileges that they currently enjoy, and occasionally abuse. I hope that we shall hear of her intention to rebalance the regulatory framework in the direction that I have suggested.

12.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) on securing this Adjournment debate and on giving the Chamber an opportunity to discuss this important matter, which exercises the minds of many hon. Members. I thank him, too, for his courtesy in giving me notice of some of the issues that he would raise. That was helpful in allowing me to respond as fully as I can.

The hon. Gentleman has drawn attention to the way in which the number of telecommunication masts has increased in the past few years. That is a reflection of the significant growth nationally in the mobile communication sector over the past 15 years. There are now 24 million subscribers in the UK. In other words, 40 per cent. of the population now have a mobile phone. That market is expected to continue to grow.

As the hon. Gentleman recognised, the Government want to encourage and facilitate the roll-out of a modern national telecommunications network. We want to ensure that the public can enjoy the benefits that come from a greater choice of service providers and a broader range of telecommunications services. An efficient and modern network brings a number of important social and economic benefits, helping, for example, to create a climate conducive to business development and providing ready access to different kinds of communications services in both rural and urban areas.

We accept the hon. Gentleman's argument: the drive to develop the telecommunications network with its attendant base stations, masts and antennae must be balanced with the Government's other priorities and commitments to the achievement of environmental objectives. That is not an easy balance, but we accept that a balancing needs to take place. Planning policy guidance for this form of development set out in PPG8 provides the framework. As we have made clear, we attach great importance to keeping to a minimum the environmental intrusion caused by the telecommunications network development. The land use planning system provides the tool for trying to strike that necesary balance.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will accept that I cannot comment on the individual cases that he raises or any of the allegations that he makes about the motives and intentions of particular companies, but I can discuss the planning issues that are relevant in those cases. I hope that that will be helpful. The general planning arrangements are that larger telecommunications developments, such as masts higher than 15m, will require a fuller planning application. Relatively minor development is permitted by the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995, referred to as the GPDO. Permitted development rights generally have been approved by the House and apply throughout England and Wales. Generally, they benefit a large number of bodies in both the public and the private sector including, for example, householders and statutory undertakers, as well as licensed telecommunications operators.

Part 24 of the order grants a range of permitted development rights for telecommunications code system operators who are licensed under the

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Telecommunications Act 1984. Those rights allow operators to carry out specified development, subject to certain conditions and limitations, without the need to make a full planning application to the local planning authority. The GPDO approach incorporates essential environmental safeguards. I should emphasise that there are special provisions regarding the installation of any mast in key designated areas such as national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty, conservation areas and sites of special scientific interest. In those areas, the installation of any mast does not enjoy permitted development rights under those orders, but development is subject to a full planning application. That allows more detailed consideration of the different aspects, including the environmental aspects of the proposals.

The main safeguard under the GPDO is provided through the prior approval precedure and that gives the local planning authority an opportunity to consider the siting and appearance of telecommunications masts. We made important amendments to the procedure last year so that operators are now required to post a site notice to publicise a proposal to erect a ground-based mast, in order to provide the public with a clear opportunity to comment to the local planning authority on its siting and appearance. If the local authority considers that the proposed development would have a detrimental effect on local amenities it can refuse approval, but authorities are advised to explore if possible the scope for modifying the siting or appearance to accommodate acceptable arrangements before doing so.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned in particular the permitted development rights given separately to statutory undertakers. Permitted development rights enable statutory undertakers such as rail operators to carry out certain developments without making a planning application. Normally, it would be unreasonable to require statutory operators providing a service to the public to make a planning application for every essential development. Local authorities would be inundated with planning applications, and the efficiency of those operators would be needlessly compromised, with consumers having to bear the resulting costs. If Railtrack had to apply for planning permission every time that it needed to carry out essential safety, maintenance or enhancement work on the rail network, that would at the very least impose serious delays and at worst create unacceptable risks for rail customers.

Permitted development rights are important to the process of statutory operators fulfilling their duties to the public in the most efficient and cost-effective way, but that does not mean that Railtrack or any other statutory operator enjoying permitted development rights may do whatever it likes. For example, in relation to the exercise of such rights under part 17 of the GPDO, any development undertaken by the railway operator—including masts—on its operational land must be needed in connection with its operations: the movement of traffic by rail. It cannot exploit that power for non-railway-related purposes. Recent circulars from my Department provide guidance to the statutory operators on the use of permitted development rights, making it clear that local planning authorities should be informed of any proposal likely to have a significant effect on amenities or the environment.

The Department is aware of concerns about statutory operators' use of permitted development rights. A report on departmental research into the use of permitted development rights by statutory operators concluded that, in general, the system of permitted development rights is operating satisfactorily, but it made several recommendations for improvement, including arrangements for consultation with the public and local authorities, as mentioned by both the hon. Member for Reigate and my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke).

In addition, the report identified several concerns in relation to rail operators, including the installation of communications masts; the impact of permitted development rights on light pollution; felling trackside trees; car parking at railway stations; and the scale and appearance of new buildings and structures. At the moment, we are considering whether to address those concerns by issuing new guidance and revising the GPDO. Members' views are therefore timely.

The hon. Member for Reigate was anxious about the number of telecommunications masts. We believe that it should be kept to an absolute minimum, consistent with the provision of an efficient national network. Our policy is that masts and sites should be shared, when appropriate, and we are taking steps to encourage that. Indeed, conditions attached to operating licences granted by the Secretary of State include a requirement to investigate mast sharing in the consequential manner requested by the hon. Gentleman before seeking to put up any new mast.

When the GPDO was changed last year, we issued new policy advice in a circular setting out our view that operators should give the local planning authority evidence of having considered the use of existing masts, buildings or other structures before seeking permission to erect any new mast, whatever its size. With evidence on the suitability of alternative sites, the operator can, at an early stage, discuss with the local planning authority whether a shared mast would be the preferable solution for a proposed development. Information from the radio sites databank that the mobile operators set up last year should help in those discussions. I accept the point that the databank needs to be more effective, but when it is, it will assist the identification of mast sharing opportunities and facilitate a strategic approach to the provision and siting of masts.

The Department has recently published a consultation paper on the rating of telecommunications masts that are shared by multiple operators. The growth of shared sites has caused uncertainty in their rates assessment. The proposals would remove that uncertainty by providing that shared mast sites receive only one rates bill, thus making it easier for operators to share masts. In addition, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the Office of Telecommunications, Oftel, intends to issue a consultation document on mast sharing later this year. I understand why he wants that document to be as robust as possible—to maximise the potential for mast sharing.

As well as base station location, sympathetic design has a key role to play in minimising the impact of telecommunications development on the environment where it must take place. The Government are encouraging operators to work together to investigate

the use of new technologies, materials and designs that will allow masts better to complement their surroundings.

The range of approaches that different companies have adopted shows that there is no such thing as a universally acceptable design solution, not least because good design is a subjective concept, but there remains an important place for some simple measures, such as early consideration in the development process of the use of planting and landscaping to help to screen the impact of developments in a local environment.

Careful consideration of the siting and design of a development should ensure that the right equipment is put in the right place. How to arrive at that solution is a further strand in striking the right balance, to which the hon. Gentleman referred, between network roll-out and protecting the environment. The Government firmly believe that telecommunications development is best advanced through the adoption of an effective partnership approach. I know that that is a hackneyed term, but I have not found another. Such an approach would involve operators, local authorities and, through them, local communities in a meaningful way. I fully accept the points that the hon. Gentleman made about that, and we want that part of the consultation arrangements to be strengthened. The code of best practice on prior approval procedures for mast development, published by the Department, underpins such a co-operative approach. A working party representing local government and the telecommunications industry drafted the code, which is now being updated.

I have outlined the different policies and initiatives that we are implementing to strike the right balance between network roll-out and the protection of the environment, and to achieve better use of existing sites, masts, buildings and other structures for locating antennas. The research recommendations on the statutory undertaker's permitted development rights, to which I have referred, will help us to address the various concerns.

The hon. Gentleman referred to many of those concerns, including the installation of telecommunications masts and their relationship to permitted development rights. We hope that the different parties will work together to achieve that balance. I am grateful to him for raising those issues—especially as it was timely to do so in the light of our considerations—and for his contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to One o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 January 2000

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

The Tote

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): I am delighted finally to have managed to obtain this debate through the ballot procedure. Success today has crowned six months of effort. However, the debate may be more apposite today than it would have been six months ago, as there has been a hint that in the next few months—or even weeks—there will be a ministerial statement on the Tote. I hope that the Minister will be able to elaborate on that.

I should welcome such a statement, as the one made by the Home Secretary on 1 May last year was, to put it delicately, opaque when it came to the ownership of the Tote and even murkier on its future. However, I am a helpful sort of person so I can tell the Minister that I quite understand his position. The Government may be leaky, but if they are to make a statement in the next few weeks or months, I accept that it is unlikely that he will give us all the details this morning. Therefore, I should understand if he were to employ a cricket bat 3 ft wide and 4 ft tall and stonewall furiously this morning. We have all been down that path, and we all understand the need for such defence.

I have two points for the Minister to take on board. The first is straightforward, and this debate underlines its importance. We need a Minister with responsibility for horses, a person in Government to argue the case for racing. That Minister could argue the case for the Tote turning into a trust, the proceeds from which could then be devoted exclusively to racing. We need a Minister for the horse, as exists in France and Ireland, although I fully accept that the Home Office should retain responsibility for betting and gaming.

I believe that my views broadly reflect those held by the vast majority of the racing fraternity in the United Kingdom, and that this debate is not just Richard Page firing off ideas without any support. However, it would do no harm for me to make clear the value of racing for this country—an aspect of the argument that is often pushed to one side.

Secondly, the racing industry employs about 60,000 people, with the betting industry employing another 40,000. One does not have to be brilliant at maths to realise that that works out to 100,000 people. All hon. Members know the ripple effect on other industries in a constituency when one activity weakens, so the total number of people supportive of and supported by racing is even greater than that 100,000.

The income generated by racing and breeding exceeds £300 million a year, generating £150 million a year in tax revenue and another £300 million a year in betting duty. As an aside, the Government must get their act together with regard to internet and overseas betting or those figures will go into a decline. However, that is a debate for another day.

There are more than 3,000 thoroughbred breeders in Britain. Some are very small, but some run quite sizeable operations. That sector achieves exports of more than £1 million a year. Last year, more than 5 million people went to watch racing involving the 13,000 horses that are in training. From that audience, the betting levy generated about £52 million. At the same time, the Tote contributed a record £12.3 million to racing. The previous record was £9.3 million, so it is evident that a substantial amount of money came back into racing.

We must bear it in mind that only 1.1 per cent. of horse racing betting turnover goes back into the sport in this country, compared with 4.4 per cent. in Australia, or the mammoth 15 per cent. in Germany. It is clear that Britain is very much the poor relation in terms of the volumes of money involved.

Our parsimonious approach is evident in the returns to British racehorse owners. Prize money receipts average 22 per cent., and in that respect I should declare an interest. Although I should be only too delighted if my prize money receipts climbed to 22 per cent., I have to say that my receipts are in the bottom half of the scale that keeps the average where it is. The costs of keeping a horse in training in this country compare with the 43 per cent. return in Australia. In the United States the return is 47 per cent., in France, 54 per cent., and in Japan, a stunning 87 per cent.

We are clearly at the bottom end of the Richter scale of support. The Tote's income stream is a vital contributor to racing's finances. It is inextricably entwined with, and an integral part of, racing in this country.

What is the future of the Tote? I am tempted to quote in detail from the debate on 26 July 1998 in the House of Lords. However, I want to emphasise two points that emerged from that debate, as I believe that it would do no harm to repeat them again and again.

The Tote was established by private Act of Parliament in 1928. It is worth underlining that the relevant Act began as a private Member's Bill, not a Government Bill. The Tote was not and has never been financed by Government money. It was financed by loans from racing. The Government do not stand behind or guarantee the Tote in any way; nor do they own any shares in it. The Government are therefore fairly remote from the Tote set-up.

Like any other bookmaker, the Tote has contributed to the Revenue for many years, with the money coming in through off-course starting prices and Tote odds. It returns to racing more than £2 million in sponsorship every year, and it also pays £6 million to race courses for the facilities that it uses. That money is vital, as the standard of some of our courses is disappointing and way below par. Those courses need to improve their image and raise their profile to make racing even more attractive to punters.

Successive Governments have benefited from the operation of the Tote, even though they contributed nothing to its creation and continued existence over the years. It is hard to comprehend how the Exchequer has a right to demand a payment for transferring the Tote into some other existence. Although there will be much

[Mr. Richard Page]

legal toing and froing, I am given to understand that, to fulfil their plans for the Tote, the Government will first have to nationalise it, then privatise it.

This Government have made much of the windfall gains enjoyed by companies that have taken advantage of privatisation. I find it difficult to understand how the Exchequer can allow an operation to be nationalised—meaning that a fair sum of taxpayers' money will have to be paid into it—and then be privatised. If more money is needed, the Government will be guilty of going in for those windfall gains of which they have been so critical in the past. That is an interesting legal concept that will no doubt develop as time goes by.

I make these points to question the legal right of the Treasury to take its cut. I see no moral right for the Government to take a single penny. The Tote should pay the transfer costs; it would be wrong for them to fall on the taxpayer. The cost of changing its status into a trust is a legitimate cost for the Tote.

Elements of the racing world have come together in an unparalleled fashion. They are not used to working together in sweetness, harmony and unity, but they have called for the Tote to be operated at arm's length by an operating board, not directly controlled by the British Horseracing Board or racing's sectional interest as a charitable trust. The relationship between the Tote and its owners should be that of a listed company and its shareholders.

I envisage the racing trust comprising a chairman and a number of board members. Nominations for the board—perhaps seven, eight or nine—would come from interested bodies, such as the BHB, the Jockey Club, the Racecourse Owners Association and the Industry Committee (Horseracing) Ltd. A number of organisations go to make up that committee. To show the unity that exists, I should like to read into the record the organisations involved—the Amateur Jockeys Association, the British Equine Veterinary Association, the Federation of Bloodstock Agents, the Horseracing Sponsors Association, the Jockeys Association of Great Britain, the Masters of Foxhounds Association, the National Joint Council for Stable Staff, the National Trainers Federation, the Permit Trainers Association, the Point-to-Point Owners and Riders Association, the Point-to-Point Secretaries Association, the Racegoers Club, the Racehorse Transporters Association, Thoroughbred Auctioneers (UK) and, indeed, the Transport and General Workers Union. I hope that the inclusion of that last organisation will sway the Minister.

I also believe that the punters should be represented. Although I can see how all the bodies that I have mentioned would nominate someone, I cannot yet see a mechanism for nominating a punter representative. The one who loses the most money may not be the most satisfactory basis on which to choose a representative. The Tote's employees should also be represented. That would result in a representative on the board from every area of racing.

We need to set the Tote free to get support for the racing industry. I have already mentioned the problems arising from internet and overseas betting. The Tote needs to do its own thing to help racing in a positive way.

Although I hope that the Minister will give detailed responses to all my points, I quite understand if he cannot. But I should like him to accept that there is a strong feeling that any charge by the Exchequer would be regarded as unfair. If any charge were to be made, and if it was more than a nominal amount, it would cripple the Tote's ability to help racing. Not enough funds go back into racing for us to allow the Tote to suffer in that way.

The racing fraternity—in which I include those Members of Parliament who are interested—does not want this issue to be tied up with any of the consequences that might flow from an election. I should like to leave the Minister with three points. We need a Minister for the horse, we need a racing trust for the Tote, and we need them now.

9.46 am

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle-under-Lyme): I favour a trust as well, but I disagree strongly with the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) about many of the issues being a debate for another day. I do not think that they are. The future of the racing industry must be considered as a whole, and if we are to have a trust, other matters must be considered.

I find the politics of racing fascinating: it makes the politics of this place look gentle, sweet and kind. It is the most interesting part of racing for me. I speak as a very poor owner of horses in the past, but hopeful ever of being a very profitable owner in the future. However, it may be a vain hope.

The problem is the amount of power that could go to the British Horseracing Board if there were a racing trust. The BHB already has control over the fixture list, which causes many problems, as people interested in racing will know. It has three members on the Horserace Betting Levy Board, and discussions are taking place on whether to abolish the levy board. That would mean another ball game altogether.

I understand that the BHB is sending threatening letters to internet betting companies, demanding copyright fees for pre-race meetings lists. I am aware that it already has an agreement with Victor Chandler in Gibraltar, who pays towards the betting list. As he was going to give money to the levy in any case—that was part of the deal that he was organising—is he now taking money from the levy and giving it instead to the BHB? That question needs to be asked. It has set the hare running on who owns the copyright of the racing list. We have not debated that, but it will affect the future of any racing company, whatever happens to the Tote.

There already seems to be a cosy agreement about who will sit on the racing trust. The hon. Gentleman gave a list; agreement has been reached, I understand, between the BHB and the Tote on who will sit on the trust. It is not in the interests of racing for something to be cut and dried before anything has been decided. It is all very well to have proposals, but to go round saying that something is definite when the proposal has not yet been agreed makes it seem like someone wanting to be king of the racing industry without proper consultation. I am concerned about what is happening, and extremely concerned that, if racing is to appeal to a wider audience, we should think carefully before a small group of people is given such wide power.

We are talking about the future of racing. Many matters are involved—including getting more people to go to racing. There must be proper debate; merely to decide to set up a trust is not good enough. I doubt whether the Minister will tell us that a racing trust will be set up to replace the Tote. I would advise him not to do so. Before such a measure, many more talks must be held—with the whole industry, not just a cosy group who want to carve it up for themselves.

I hope that the Minister will acknowledge my comments, and that he will understand that not only one group is interested in the future of racing; there is a wide audience out there. The problems are great, and he should consider the matter far more carefully than many people want him to.

9.51 am

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury): I am delighted to have the chance to speak in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on having finally achieved the chance to hold the debate, after several months of trying. The matter is important for all parties; it is not party political. Members of all parties who have racing interests—or who have the best interests of racing at heart—will want to take part. I hope and believe that there will be cross-party consensus in favour of racing and of the transfer of the Tote—if it is to be transferred—into a trust controlled by the racing industry.

I think that my constituency has the second greatest interest—after Newmarket—in racing. We not only have a well-known race course, but a huge interest in breeding and training up on the downs. There is also a veterinary interest. I am happy to note that several owners live in my constituency. The industry provides employment, not only in my constituency but in other parts of the country, both for people who are comparatively wealthy—even if many of them spend more time losing money on racing than making it—and for some of the less wealthy members of our community. Perhaps the only chance of employment for those people may be that the racing industry should thrive and be prosperous.

At present, there is a threat to employment in the industry—especially for some of those who are less skilled in other matters—because of the potential ban on hunting. That is a contentious issue, on which I do not want to dwell in detail. I have made my position clear in the past: I am in favour of a ban on hunting. However, those in favour and those opposed will all agree that a ban is likely be introduced in the near future. When it comes in, that can only increase the threat to racing—particularly to national hunt racing. In view of that, it is especially important that we should take care not to damage the industry in any other way—for example, by losing some of the money that currently comes in from the Tote.

Sadly, several yards have already closed—I have lost one or two in my constituency. Several horses have been taken abroad, where, as has been explained, more money goes back into the industry—directly, from prize money, and indirectly, from a levy on the betting industry for that purpose. Some owners have an incentive to take their horses abroad and that is already happening.

There are race courses that greatly depend on the continuing prosperity of the Tote, so that money continues to come into the industry. As the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire explained, it is difficult to understand the moral grounds by which the Government would remove the Tote and would, in effect, put the ownership and managership of the industry into private hands. There is a danger that the monopoly of Tote betting could be transferred into a private monopoly. The Labour Government would surely not want to make such a proposal. It could not be seen to be in the best interests of racing as a whole if Tote betting were put into a private monopoly—for example, if it were to be taken over by one of the large betting companies.

The Tote was created by racing people for racing people. In the past, it never belonged to the taxpayer. It should not be handed over to the taxpayer. The Tote should be left in the hands of the racing industry. The obvious way to do that is to create a trust, as has been explained, and to leave the Tote in the hands of the racing industry. That would ensure that money from the Tote goes back into the industry; in that way, both the industry and the Tote can thrive in the future.

9.56 am

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): I am most grateful to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page), who made a compelling case, both in describing the financial background to the situation in racing and, most important, in setting out a structure for the future of the Tote, which was most persuasive.

My hon. Friend mentioned the importance to employment of racing and breeding. It is commonly thought that 100,000 people are employed in the industry. Indeed, racing and breeding employ about 60,000. That needs to be put in context—one in eight of all agricultural workers are so employed. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) referred to the possible threat to hunting, but, because of the terrible problems in the agricultural sector and the difficulties facing farmers throughout the country, employment in agriculture will be under considerable difficulty and pressure in the months to come. In considering employment in breeding and racing, we should bear that broad agricultural background in mind.

The health of racing is rather like the curate's egg. It is true that prize money remains low by international standards. The contribution of bookmakers via the levy, is about £52 million, so the amount of money currently contributed to racing by the Tote—£12.3 million—is substantial. That is an important contribution—apart from help to race courses and other forms of assistance from the Tote. The future of the Tote and the financing of racing through it will become even more important in the years ahead.

I am happy that the number of people going to race meetings has reached a record going back to 1965. Over the past two years, in my constituency, auctioneering activity at Tattersalls has been excellent. That shows that there is high demand for top-quality bloodstock.

My hon. Friend pointed out that the racing and betting interests are often divided over the outlook for horse racing and the industry in this country. They have

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radically different attitudes as to the financing of the industry. However, all can agree that a contribution of about £12.3 million, which has risen and has the potential to grow, is vital for the future viability of the industry.

The hon. Member for Newbury referred briefly to the internet. I shall deal with that matter at some length because it involves forces that are difficult to control and it will have a significant impact on the whole future financing of the racing industry and, of course, on Government finances. No Government know how to tackle that problem. The internet is driving prices down, as is evident in the retail sector. Offshore betting by telephone has been growing. Ladbroke's, Coral and William Hill have developed or are developing offshore companies. A voluntary ban introduced by Ladbroke's and Hill's was abandoned because Victor Chandler set up in Gibraltar.

At present, the 9 per cent. deduction from all bets in the United Kingdom consumes more than 40 per cent. of the money spent in betting offices and by telephone customers. In the United Kingdom, we have myriad confusing and antiquated betting arrangements. I welcome the Government's inquiry into gambling; we need to understand how gambling will react to meet the challenge of simplification and the challenges that the internet, e-commerce and offshore betting imply. Will the Minister tell us when that process is likely to be concluded?

Not surprisingly, the Treasury is seeking ways to protect its income. Three hundred million pounds is raised from general betting duty on horse racing alone. Can the position be sustainable if the pressures that I have described continue?

In November, the Government announced that it would ban advertising on Teletext by offshore bookmakers, and there is talk of tax penalties. How can Governments control the situation if Victor Chandler offers free telephone calls and a 3 per cent. deduction, versus the current 9.5 per cent. in the United Kingdom? Success beckons, with mobile telephones and the internet—ultimately to racing's disadvantage, because the money from bookmaking helps to finance the industry.

The Betting Office Licensees Association commissioned a report by Europe Economics. It studied the experience of Ireland, where duty was reduced from 10 to 5 per cent. Admittedly, the Irish economy has been doing extremely well, but betting turnover has increased by about 30 per cent. Ultimately, Governments cannot buck the market.

The British Horseracing Board agrees. It has called for a cut in off-course punter deductions to 5 per cent. from the current 9 per cent., and for a cut in general betting duty from 6.75 to 5 per cent. Of course those are Treasury matters, but the Tote's outlook must be viewed in that context. Others would like betting duty to drop to 3 per cent.

It is generally recognised that the current situation is unsatisfactory, and that there are grave questions to be asked about the future financing of racing. Therefore, the role of the Tote, and its ability to generate funding for racing, become even more important. I am delighted to say that racing takes a broadly united view of those issues.

In 1991, the Select Committee on Home Affairs recommended the sale of the Tote to a democratically accountable body. Arguably, we have that body today. The details of how it would operate betting offices and race course facilities must be addressed, so there is much to do, but there is widespread agreement among racing's constituent groups.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): My hon. Friend may have inadvertently been wrong. I believe that, in 1991, the Home Affairs Committee recommended that the Tote should be given, not sold, to such a body.

Mr. Spring: If I used the word sold, I was wrong. The crux of the matter at the time was that the Committee called for a democratically accountable body.

The time has come for action. We have spoken about the need to appoint a single Minister in charge of the horse, and I believe and hope that one will be appointed. We must give the Tote a status, so that it is viable and enriches racing for the long term. Purchase price, structure and composition will need to be worked out, but I believe that there is an opportunity for the Tote to contribute ultimately and successfully to the viability of racing, that most important industry for this country.

10.5 am

Mr. Neil Turner (Wigan): My interest in the debate is not confined to horse racing; it is focused on the Tote, whose headquarters are in my constituency. One of the first things that I did when I was elected was to visit them, because the Tote employs about 1,000 people in Wigan. The Tote is investing heavily to bring itself up to date and into the 21st century with new computer technology. It is among the most advanced operations in the betting industry.

However, we need to sort out the Tote's future. There is far too much indecision and far too little certainty. Those who work for it in Wigan are deeply worried. I hope that the Minister will tell us that things will be settled very soon. Many of its workers are part-time, and their shift patterns are convenient, especially for those—mostly women—who have children to care for.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): The point that the hon. Gentleman is making about the importance of part-time work to Tote staff applies not only to Wigan but to all 59 United Kingdom race courses.

Mr. Turner: That is absolutely correct. I am simply saying that, because the headquarters are in Wigan, the issue is greater importance to my constituency.

When I visited the Tote's headquarters, I was surprised to discover that much of the betting that takes place within the Tote involves football, boxing, rugby league and so on. If we are to hand over the Tote to a trust, it should not be restricted to horse racing. People who bet on other sports would be miffed if they thought that the money that they were putting into the Tote was going solely to horse racing and not being used to benefit the sport that they were interested in.

A windfall tax may be imposed if the Tote is privatised, or nationalised and then privatised. The Government were right to take back some of the excess profits of privatised industries because those industries had been undersold. However, in the case of the Tote the surplus will go to the general public. There is a clear difference between windfalls going into the private hands of shareholders and windfalls going to the general public for the public good.

Mr. Gray: The hon. Gentleman seems to be moving towards proposing that the Tote should be privatised. Does he recall the remark made by his right hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), now Foreign Secretary, before the general election:

"There will be no proposal by Labour to sell the Tote"?

That was perfectly plain. Does that commitment have the same status as the commitment with regard to National Air Traffic Services, which was that Britain's airspace was not for sale?

Mr. Turner: I was not debating whether the Tote should be privatised or outlining what its future should be. I was merely making the point that, if the Government decide to privatise it, there is a clear difference between the profits from privatisation going to the private sector and private people and the profits going into the public purse. If the Government privatise the Tote, it is right that the surpluses should go to the public sector for use in whatever way the Government wish. However, that is a matter for the future.

I emphasise to my hon. Friend the Minister that the issue needs to be settled. The Tote must have a clear direction. We cannot have the matter hanging round in the way that it has for so long. The interests of racing need to be taken into account, but so do the interests of the other sports in which the Tote has betting interests. The interests of the work force, particularly those who work in my constituency, clearly need to be taken into account, as do the interests of management who have a clear view of the Tote's future. I hope that, in the not too distant future, the Minister will be able to provide clear direction on where the Tote is going.

10.11 am

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): As I am required to do, I declare an interest. I have a registered interest with the Tote, and Cheltenham race course is in my constituency. It is the source of a great deal of information and, occasionally, expense.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on his persistence in trying to secure a debate on the Tote. I am glad that that has paid off. The fact that he has been persistent shows how much he regards the racing industry and that he, like us all, recognises its importance to this country. He ably and eloquently demonstrated why the industry is important not only to the people who enjoy it, but to the people who work in it and to the Exchequer. He also provided statistics that show its importance.

There are some good statistics on racing. The figures for the number of racehorses in training and the number of people going racing are very impressive. Some statistics are more impressive than ever. However, as my hon. Friend pointed out, there are some bad statistics. For example, a small amount of betting turnover finds its way back into racing, and owners in this country recover a lower percentage of their expenses compared with those recovered elsewhere.

It is important that we do not view racehorse owners as a group of extremely rich people. Some horses are owned by a number of people. In these days when world travel is so easy, it is important to recognise that it is much more beneficial to send one's horses abroad. We must be careful about that. There are good and bad statistics for racing and, in some ways, the position is rather static or even worse than that.

My hon. Friend used statistics to show how important the Tote is to racing. It is important not only financially, but in other ways. Under the expert guidance and chairmanship of Peter Jones, much interest has been taken in racing. That has been generated partly by the Tote's performance, especially in recent weeks. Who could have ignored the fact that, for two consecutive Saturdays, ordinary punters, such as me, have had the opportunity to win £1 million on the scoop-six bet? I was not far off winning that sum, but, as they say, a miss is as good as a mile.

The Tote has several options for the future. Of course, there is the opportunity for a straight commercial sale and there would be some advantages to that. It would offer the Tote freedom and it might lead to the injection of capital and new people becoming involved. However, in those circumstances, how would we ensure that racing received the same amount of money as it does now from the Tote? A regulatory system, such as those for the water, gas and electricity industries, could be created. We could create an "Oftot" or something like that to ensure that money went back into racing. However, if we were to promise the private company that was created that we would take its profits away, I suggest that we would not have a successful sale of the Tote. That is not a viable option, especially given the way that it was set up and the reasons for its creation that were described by my hon. Friend.

A racing trust would secure the profits of the Tote for racing and would have racing people running it. The hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) was right when he said that the Tote takes bets on other sports, but historically, it was set up for racing purposes. I am a football fan and I would not want football fans to be estranged from the Tote. However, the fact that it was set up for the racing industry is all important. People in the racing industry say that betting and horse racing are two separate industries. They are correct in technical terms, but I think that one depends on the other. It is important that the Tote remains within racing and within a racing trust.

I pay tribute to the chairman of the Tote and all those with whom he has been involved in setting up an agreement with the British Horseracing Board and others. As my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire pointed out, such agreements are even harder to construct in racing than they are in Parliament. The agreement shows the willingness of the

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British Horseracing Board and the Tote to sort out differences and problems and to come together for the benefit of racing. That point, above all others, shows why a racing trust should be set up.

It is important to set up such a trust very soon. When Ladbroke bought Coral and passed some shops to the Tote, uncertainty was created in the industry and among the people who work in it because of the delay in finalising the deal that was caused by the referral to the Office of Fair Trading. I therefore urge the Minister to make a swift decision and the Government to enact the necessary legislation quicker than they appear to intend.

Some months ago, the Home Secretary announced—I think at the Tote's annual general meeting—that there would be a change in its status. Several years could pass before the Government bring that about. The passage of so much time is not good for the industry, so I urge the Minister to make a decision, announce it quickly and persuade the Government to introduce the necessary legislation. It should not be that complicated or difficult.

I wish to consider the money that the Government appear to want to take out of the Tote. The steering group report says:

"the government has not financed the Tote and does not stand behind it, eg as a financial guarantor".

That fact is crucial as is the fact that the Government do not own the Tote. They may have given it a pool betting monopoly, but that is why it was set up and it does not provide a reason to take money out of it.

In the old nationalised industries, such as British Steel, which might have lost £1 million a day at the height of its success, the taxpayer was due a return. Taxpayers have not financed the Tote, so I do not see why they—and I am normally on their side—are due any return. It would retard the prospects of progress and, to some extent, weaken the Tote's position if a substantial amount of money were taken out. That would set things off to a bad start and—to use a racing expression—handicap it against other bookmakers. Is that fair when we want to create a successful enterprise when we change the status of the Tote?

Unlike a case in which a company acquires more shops or more business and has extra profits to pay off a loan, if the Tote's status is changed, it will not gain any extra business immediately from which to pay back the Government. Money would be taken from its present operating costs and income. That would be a smash-and-grab raid on behalf of the Treasury. I urge the Minister to stand up to the Treasury for the good of racing.

In conclusion, I repeat that racing is important to the country. There are worrying statistics, and we need to put more money into racing and to create a trust to control the Tote. That would enable the Tote to expand and carry out many more exciting ventures, which would be good for the industry. The Tote is therefore extremely important to racing. I urge the Government to make a speedy decision and to implement the necessary changes. I further urge the Minister to persuade the Treasury not to handicap the Tote and racing by taking money from it.

10.20 am

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I have rather a sad interest to declare in this debate as I have been backing slow horses since I was about 15.

Mr. Gray: And fast women.

Mr. Paterson: I shall pass on the question of fast women.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on securing this debate. I know that he tried extremely hard to do so, and his determination has paid off. This is a unique opportunity to do something extremely good for racing because, as far as I know, everyone in racing agrees on this matter.

I have to take issue with the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding). I do not know anybody who opposes this measure. This is a unique moment in the byzantine politics of racing in that all parties appear to agree.

Mrs. Golding: I made it quite clear that I was in favour of a trust, and I should not like the hon. Gentleman to think otherwise.

Mr. Paterson: I am delighted by that intervention. I understood that the hon. Lady was advocating a delay. If I misunderstood her, I apologise and withdraw my remark.

The unique feature of this proposal is the agreement that has brought all racing interests together. I heartily endorse the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson). He was right to say that time is short. We hear much from the Government about globalisation, and no industry can be more affected by globalisation than racing. Trying to stop people betting on the internet would be as effective as King Canute setting up his throne on the beach at low tide. Betting duties would flow straight to the new betting points abroad.

It is pointless and childish to pretend that the Government can ban adverts for internet betting. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) said, the only way to increase betting is to do as the Irish have done and reduce duties to make the industry competitive. In Ireland, the take has rocketed to 30 per cent. It is childish to try to stop people betting abroad.

It is equally childish to pretend that in today's racing industry horses will stay here and that owners owe us a favour. When the big owners go to Keeneland, they can send their horses all over the world, to Australia, Hong Kong, France or elsewhere. They do not have to come here—we have to offer them the very best. There have been spectacular cases in the past few weeks where horses have been arbitrarily moved abroad. Many jobs and businesses are at stake.

Racing and breeding support 60,000 jobs, which, as my hon. Friend said, means that they employ one in eight agricultural workers. With the pig industry losing millions of pounds every week and milk prices at rock bottom, we have to encourage jobs in the countryside. Here we have a chance to help.

Thoroughbred exports alone are worth £100 million a year. There are 7,300 thoroughbred breeders in Britain, of whom about 350 are full-time. All that could be in

jeopardy if we do not grab this opportunity. The moment is right because more people are going racing. Last year, 5.1 million went racing, which is the highest figure since 1965. The state is the winner.

In 1998–99, the Tote's contribution to racing was £12.3 million compared with £9.3 million the year before. That is thanks to the new dynamic management in the Tote. Who really won? The state took £3 million in corporation tax and £21.3 million in betting duty. Racing did not gain, as we can see from the fact that only 1.1 per cent. of betting turnover in racing goes back into the sport. That compares with 4.4 per cent. in Australia and 15 per cent. in Germany.

We must not forget that earnings can be sent to those countries with no problems at all. We cannot blame owners for sending their yearlings abroad because the average take by owners in this country, after the cost of keeping a race horse in training, is only 22 per cent. compared with 87 per cent. in Japan, 47 per cent. in the United States and 54 per cent. in France.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury said, if the Government act quickly, they have a chance to do something good for racing. The Government did not set up the Tote—it was set up by a private Act of Parliament in 1928—they do not own it or any shares in it and they have never subsidised it. I raised this matter in Home Office questions this week and the Minister's answer was most unsatisfactory. I noticed that the Minister nodded when my hon. Friend mentioned the monopoly of pool betting, but that is only one sector of betting. The Tote is up against fierce competition from this country and abroad, from the lottery and other forms of betting. It is not a normal monopoly.

On that basis, it is time for the state to get out of racing. The trust has the full support of the industry. How much will the state take for the transfer of an organisation that does not belong to it, and when will it transfer it?

10.26 am

Dr. Lewis Moonie (Kirkcaldy): I congratulate the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on securing this debate. I apologise for my tardiness in getting here and for missing his opening speech, and I can assure him that it was entirely involuntary.

I declare an interest as a paid parliamentary consultant to William Hill. I therefore have a specific interest in gambling, although I have to say to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) that, in a long life of trying to defeat the odds, that is the only way that I have ever managed to make any money out of a bookmaker. I finally found a way to do so, and I have not placed a bet since.

This is a welcome opportunity to debate a serious issue facing racing and the gambling industry. This is a crucial nexus. It has become clear from developments over the past six months that the industry cannot be left alone, with the Government simply assuming that it will limp along and we can patch over any cracks that appear. The offshore cracks in particular cannot be patched over, and the loss to Treasury coffers will be substantial over the next few years. I do not think that anything can be done about that.

The present telephone-based system will quickly develop into internet betting. One of the great—or, from the Government's point of view, depressing—features of internet betting is that it is impossible for Governments to control it. The quicker they realise that and the sooner they start to live with it, the better for them and for those concerned in gambling and racing, including the general punter.

The Tote, as a pool betting system, is a natural monopoly. I do not see how such a monopoly could be fully transferred to the private sector. That would be wrong and challengeable in law. It could not be defended under European Union competition law unless a trust were set up to organise it. I do not think that the Government have a prayer of getting rid of it. They should recognise that such a natural monopoly would be best dealt with by a trust that is set up to serve racing. We should bear it in mind that to serve racing was the raison d'être of the Tote when it was set up, and that primary purpose should continue.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the need for quick decisions. We cannot afford to dilly-dally over the matter for much longer. I welcome the fact that the Government are setting up a general commission to consider every aspect of gambling. That is long overdue, but the Tote cannot afford to wait until that weighty organisation comes to its conclusions, which could easily take a year or more. Therefore, I would warmly welcome a quick decision by Ministers.

If we allow matters to continue to develop as they have done, there will be a loss to the Treasury and to racing. Gambling will become prey to criminal influences: the moment it is taken offshore, it will become more difficult to control and unsavoury elements may well find a niche. It is far better to recognise the need for change and to accept a reduction in revenue to encourage gambling to remain onshore. In that way, we shall help to ensure a healthy future for racing and the gambling industry.

10.30 am

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on having secured the debate. For some months, with my encouragement, he has been trying in the ballot to win a place for such a debate. However, I agree that the delay has been worth while, because the time is now right for a decision to be made on the Tote's future. In the period since such a debate was first mooted, clear progress has been made within the racing industry toward drawing up recommendations that can be put to the Government.

Although I speak now on behalf of the official Opposition, I, like many hon. Members, have a close constituency interest in racing, in that the Malton and Norton area of my constituency contains stableyards with a long history, stretching back almost three centuries. I am glad to report that they have of late enjoyed better times, with more big race winners, but much remains to be done. At this juncture, I should express my agreement with all that has been said about the importance to the rural economy of racehorse training, and the need to improve the lot of many of the yards and their staff.

I place on record my admiration and affection for the Tote. I suspect that many participants in today's debate have, from time to time, enjoyed the Tote's hospitality. My association with the Tote began when, with the hon.

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Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), I was a member of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. We grasped the nettle and inquired into the Tote, the Horserace Betting Levy Board and the equivalent body for greyhound racing.

That fascinating experience began by our being told that we would find an incompetent rabble at the Tote. In fact, we found that, under its then chairman, Lord Wyatt, it was an extremely well run organisation. I endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for Wigan (Mr. Turner) about the staff at the Wigan headquarters. Members of the Home Affairs Committee visited Wigan during our inquiry: we were greatly impressed and found that many of the allegations made against the Tote, especially by some sections of the media, were wholly unjustified. I pay tribute to the Tote's current chairman, Peter Jones, and its team of directors and executives. They have successfully developed the Tote in recent years.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) said, the key recommendation of the Home Affairs Committee report was that the Tote should be given to racing when a suitable body, capable of running racing, had been established. That recommendation was the spur to the creation of the British Horseracing Board. We made our recommendation for two reasons: first, to get the Government out of an organisation in which they had no real long-term role; and, secondly, to enable the Tote to develop its commercial interests to a greater extent than it could as part of the public sector, thus generating increased profits that could be fed into racing, especially in support of prize money and race course development.

That objective is within racing's grasp, but one or two fences remain to be taken. Even though hurdles are lower than fences, using the word hurdles to describe any obstacles would imply that jumping them will be difficult; in fact, it should not be difficult to do so. The chief fence that has to be cleared is the Government's decision on how to proceed.

The Tote is a strategic asset for racing. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire described it as a vital part of the income stream of racing. The £12.3 million it generated in 1998–99 is significantly more than the hon. Member for Mansfield and I remember it producing nine years ago, when our Committee produced its report. That sum is almost one quarter of the revenue racing gets through the levy. The best way to illustrate the importance and effective use of money from the Tote is to draw attention to the Tote's sponsorship of key races at this country's two main racing festivals: the Cheltenham gold cup, which is coming up shortly, and the Tote Ebor handicap at York in August. They are the two great festivals of jump racing and flat racing respectively; without the Tote, they would be all the poorer.

The Tote has never received Government funding or taxpayers' support. The Government do not own the Tote and, regardless of racing's interests, that is one of the key reasons why it should not be sold off to the highest bidder. However, it is important to recognise that the Tote has enjoyed a monopoly on pool betting. In discussions with racing's leadership, I have learned that the industry wants to continue to enjoy that monopoly and recognises that it might justify a relatively modest payment being made to the Government to set the Tote free and enable it to become a directly held asset of racing.

The structure of such a transfer to racing of that asset would have to command the support of all strands of racing. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Hertfordshire listed the many organisations that have expressed support for the creation of a new racing trust, but the three key bodies that have had to come together to try to settle a common position are the British Horseracing Board, the Racecourse Association and the Tote. Despite a shaky start, I have been encouraged by what I have seen of their deliberations. For many of the bodies involved, the experience has been a unifying one. The racing industry has, at long last, shown some maturity and responsibility in its attempts to reach agreement.

The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) has been treasurer of our all-party racing group for many years. It is because of the likelihood that I would have to speak on such matters on behalf of the Conservative party that I stepped down as chairman of that all-party group. The hon. Lady said that it appeared that there was a cosy club in racing, but I do not believe that that is so. Racing has been challenged to find a solution and it is not surprising that, in responding to that challenge, it has attempted to resolve all the problems that might arise by creating a new structure. However, I gather that the BHB would have only one of the eight seats on the Tote board.

I do not want to get bogged down in detail, because we have not yet seen the document that gives full details of the proposals—we have seen only the broad outline. However, it appears that, of the available options and in the light of the Government's announcement that they are minded to put the Tote into the private sector, the racing trust proposal is the most attractive. A total sell-off of the Tote is unacceptable, not least because of the likely diminution in profits returning to racing. Also, it would be unacceptable to create a privately owned Tote monopoly of pool betting, a point which the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy (Dr. Moonie) rightly made. We listened with interest to his perspective on the basis of the main high-street bookmakers.

A private pool would lead to pressure for the pool to be broken up, or it could lead to the end of the monopoly of pool betting. That would be disastrous for horse racing and it would be equally bad for punters. It is essential that the pool monopoly be retained. The same argument underpins the concept of the national lottery. I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) did not win scoop 6, and I have no doubt that he is too. He spoke of the value of a massive single pool in terms of attractive bets and the opportunity through horse racing to create millionaires, in addition to the national lottery. That is an extremely important factor.

There are genuine questions about other matters—for example, the protection of the punter, efficacy and the need for the running of the pool and of the Tote itself to be properly monitored. None of these issues is beyond early resolution. There are also the interests of other betting organisations. As the hon. Member for Wigan said, there are other sports interests, which must be

considered. I do not believe that these matters undermine in any way the concept of the proposed racing trust.

The Government need to take some early decisions on the deregulation of gambling. More importantly—we appreciate that this is not a matter for the Minister—there is the vexed issue of betting duty and the need to deal with the difficulties created by betting on the internet and the offshore activities of some bookmakers.

Those issues are for another day. Our opportunity this morning is to indicate our view on the future of the Tote. I hope that I have made it clear that the Conservative preference would be to give real and urgent consideration to the racing trust proposal. I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member for Wigan that the matter needs to be settled, not least for the members of the staff who work for the Tote throughout the country, to whom we pay tribute. The employment that the Tote generates is important to local communities.

We think that the proposed racing trust deserves every consideration. We are unconvinced by the other options. The trust is the best chance that racing has had to show what it can do for a generation or more. My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) was right when he said that this is a unique moment for racing, and racing will not forgive us if we fluff this chance.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I join in congratulating the hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire (Mr. Page) on raising the debate. It is an enormously important issue. The racing industry is clearly important to Britain. The debate provides a useful opportunity to air many important questions that are associated with the future of the Tote and of horse racing.

There have been some extremely good speeches, including those of my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) and for Kirkcaldy (Dr. Moonie). The hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) made an important contribution, given his extensive knowledge of the racing industry. The hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) and others also spoke very well.

I need to make it clear that the Government are not willing to announce today their conclusions about the sale of the Tote. However, I shall give you some indication, Mr. Chairman, of when we might make that announcement.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Frank Cook): Order. I remind hon. Members that this is not a Committee but a convention of the whole House.

Mr. O'Brien: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for South-West Hertfordshire said that the industry needs someone to argue for racing. I am not sure whether I want to be designated the Minister for the horse, but I am happy to say that I would want to be an advocate for the success of the industry, which is enormously important to Britain. It employs many people and millions of people have an interest in it, even if it is merely to put a bet on horses from time to time.

The industry benefits us all in many ways. For example, betting duty is paid to the Exchequer, which benefits every taxpayer. I agree with the hon. Member for Tewkesbury that racing is not only a rich man's sport. My father was very far from being a rich man, but he supported the industry for many years. Many people care deeply about racing, and not only because it benefits them economically or is of interest to them. In many ways, it is part of our country's culture. It needs to be respected for that reason.

The Tote is also extremely important to us. A few statistics might illustrate that importance. In 1998–99, the Tote had a turnover of £497 million. That was an increase of 25 per cent. on the previous year. There was a profit of £23.9 million, which was an increase of 34 per cent. From that profit, it gave £12.3 million to horse racing, which was an increase of 32 per cent. It has more than 300 betting offices and the credit betting operation has more than 50,000 customers. It operates pool betting at all 59 race courses and employs 2,800 full and part-time staff.

I agree with the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) that it is time to send a clear message that the Government need to get out of an organisation in which it should not have a long-term, direct role. We must ensure that the Tote's long-term future is secured, and that is what we propose to do.

We have given the most careful consideration to how the Government get out of having a role in the Tote and to the way in which we secure its long-term future. We want to be sure that we reach the right conclusion, which pays proper regard both to the interests of horse racing and to those of the taxpayer. We would do neither a service by trying to rush our fences. As we all know, the Government decided to sell the Tote only on the advice of a steering group which was chaired by its chairman, Peter Jones. On the basis of the group's recommendations, we are satisfied that a sale would represent the best means of securing the Tote's future in the increasingly competitive and diverse business environment in which it operates.

One option, which I know is favoured by many, is the sale of the Tote to a racing trust. In considering the sale options, the Home Office received a proposal, jointly sponsored by the British Horseracing Board and the Tote itself, for the acquisition of the Tote by racing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) referred to the politics of racing, suggesting that it made politics in this place look kind. We wondered for a while whether the various political groups in racing would be able to come together and form a coalition government given the proposal that a racing trust should run the Tote. I am pleased that there is a proposal. We will give it careful and detailed consideration. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme called it a cosy deal, rather than a cosy club, but it is not such a done deal. She asked me

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to consider the views of all racing. In that regard, hers are wise words. We need to consult widely and ensure that the industry broadly supports the proposals.

Mr. Page: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I will give way, but only once, as I am anxious to conclude my remarks.

Mr. Page: I cannot think of another organisation that is not signed up to the proposal. If the Minister can think of one that is not signed up, I shall pop along and see its representatives.

Mr. O'Brien: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and what others have said during the debate. I shall weigh the words of all of them with great care. We shall examine the issues with care and we intend to consult widely. The hon. Gentleman would want us to do so, to ensure an element of consensus in the industry.

The hon. Member for Ryedale is right to say that some element of agreement has been reached, and we should congratulate the industry on achieving that agreement. I agree with the comments of the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) on the matter. We need to ensure that the future of racing is secured for the long term.

We have looked at the issues in detail, alongside the other options, the principle of establishing a trust and the possibility of a sale on the open market or a flotation. My officials have had discussions with the relevant racing interests so that we can be confident that we fully understand the detail of the proposals.

We are aware that the Tote is considered by many to be an integral part of horse racing, not least because of its presence at each of the United Kingdom's 59 race courses and through its financial contribution to the sport over many years.

The Government recognise that racing has a stake in the Tote, and it has been one of our key objectives in this exercise to ensure that the interests of racing are safeguarded. There are other stakeholders, notably the present managers and staff, whose collective efforts have been a major factor in the Tote's success. However, it must be recognised that the taxpayer also has a legitimate interest in the business. That was an important conclusion of the Tote review steering group.

Although the Tote was originally constituted under a private Bill, the statutory framework within which it now operates is largely based on the Betting, Gaming and Lotteries Act 1963. Today's Tote is a very different and far more diverse business than that originally envisaged by Parliament under that private Act in 1928, and decisions about its future must self-evidently be taken in today's context, and not in the context of 1928.

Mr. Alan Meale (Mansfield): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I will give way one last time, because my hon. Friend has not contributed to the debate so far. I am happy for him to make a contribution.

Mr. Meale: I thank my hon. Friend. He speaks of protecting the public interest. May I point out to him that a recent ruling by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission on the proposed Ladbroke-Coral merger clearly showed the danger of off-course betting becoming a monopoly? Choosing the route of the trust would prevent that for ever in the industry.

Mr. O'Brien: That is one of the issues to which we must give full consideration. I assure my hon. Friend that, when we make known our views, we will take account of that and many other points.

We must not overlook the extent to which the Tote's status as a public body has been a factor in its commercial success, not least through the perception of its probity and respectability, on which those who work for the Tote are to be congratulated. As the hon. Member for Tewkesbury observed, the Tote has enjoyed a commercial advantage over competitors by virtue of the grant by the Government of an exclusive licence to operate pool betting on horse racing. Indeed, that remains the foundation on which the Tote's broader success has been built.

The hon. Member for Tewkesbury argued—ingeniously, I thought—that the taxpayer—the public—would smash and grab the racing industry. I disagree with that view. The unarguable fact is that the Tote is at present a public body, and it is therefore reasonable that the taxpayer should obtain some benefit from its sale. The Government will defend the taxpayer against those who would seek to give away potential benefits.

The taxpayer has a legitimate interest and it is important that when the future of the industry is determined, we balance the interests of the industry, the long-term future of the Tote and the taxpayer, which are all legitimate interests. The fact that neither the Government nor anyone else currently own the Tote does not alter that conclusion.

Mr. Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: No.

Primary legislation will be required before the Tote can be sold, and we will introduce that at the appropriate time and when parliamentary time allows.

Hon. Members will understand why I cannot say today when we will be able to introduce such a Bill, but I have noted the arguments for it to be introduced sooner rather than later. I will bear in mind the views expressed by the Opposition. The hon. Member for Ryedale said that he wanted some early movement on the matter and we shall take that on board. No doubt the matter will be discussed through the usual channels.

I am aware of the need to reduce uncertainty about the Tote's future in the interests of the business, the Tote's staff and the industry as a whole. I remain hopeful that we shall be able to announce our conclusions about the future of the Tote within the next few weeks. [*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan asks how long, so I say not long. The future of the Tote does not stand alone as an issue facing the industry, although it is one of the more important issues.

Alongside our assessment of the sale options, the Home Office has been reviewing the Horserace Betting Levy Board and the current levy system. It is our present

intention to make a single announcement covering both the Tote and the levy board. Examination of the issues has taken some time, but it is right that we should be able to set out our conclusions clearly for those who have a direct interest in the future of the racing industry.

Although the hon. Member for Tewkesbury thinks that the process has taken a long time, it has not taken longer than we planned. We must balance the various considerations that a successful sale strategy would have to cover, and ensure that the financial implications have been properly evaluated. We must also ensure that the racing industry comes together on the proposal for a trust.

If we had gone too fast at those fences, we could have ended up with a situation in which some of the riders had come off at the back and the racing industry had not got its act together at the front. It has now done so, and we can give full and proper consideration to the proposals. We can also begin to examine the other issues that will directly affect the future of racing.

We expect to make an announcement soon. It will set out clearly our perception of the Government's future relationship with horse racing, especially with the industry's funding arrangements. Today's debate has shown that British horse racing is an industry and a sport of major national and international importance, and the Government wish it to prosper and thrive in the years ahead. I welcome the opportunity that the debate has provided to make that important point.

Banking Sector

10.59 am

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): I am grateful for the opportunity of securing a debate on the United Kingdom banking sector. I would like to focus on banks overcharging small businesses. That is a serious matter of considerable public interest with significant implications for Government.

My attention was drawn to the problem through the experiences of a small business that trades in Bedford. Its proprietor had become convinced over the years that he was being charged too much on his business account. Strenuous efforts succeeded in generating a refund of £16,000 from the relevant bank as a final settlement of the dispute. However, my constituent persisted because he knew that more money was owed. He secured the services of a firm that specialises in recovering alleged overcharges. Even then, the bank delayed, blocked and prevaricated. I became involved at that stage, at my constituent's request. I was surprised that the bank, although it sent me lengthy and courteous letters, initially refused my request for all the parties to meet in an effort to resolve the matter once and for all. It eventually agreed to a meeting, which I attended as an observer.

After two or three hours of vigorous negotiation, the matter was settled and the bank wrote out a cheque on the spot that was well in excess of £20,000. I was taken aback. Together with the earlier cheque, the bank had returned to my constituent's business more than £36,000, including compound interest. That £36,000 should not have been taken from the business in the first place. It constituted overcharges, which represent valuable cash flow—the life-blood of any small business. It should have been available to underpin the business's activities, and assist its employment capability and its contribution to the local economy. That £36,000 was returned only after five years of effort—which would have been better expended in running the business—by the proprietor and after he involved a specialist firm and his Member of Parliament.

My first thoughts about the case were that the unfortunate experience was simply the consequence of a series of human errors and misjudgments by the bank in dealing with an individual customer. I was rather sceptical when the overcharge recovery specialists, Anglia Business Associates, told me that my constituent's experience was not uncommon and was, indeed, so widespread that several firms and individuals specialised in and made a living from recovering bank overcharges for business customers all over the country. Those firms describe themselves as the bank audit industry.

Anglia Business Associates showed me its evidence, which was not only drawn from people who had contacted the company because they believed that they had a problem, but from random testing by spot audits on business accounts in various parts of the country, organised on separate occasions in the past few years by, for example, BBC World's "Watchdog", ITV's "World in Action", Granada's "Tonight with Trevor McDonald" and *The Daily Telegraph*. That evidence showed that approximately 75 per cent. of all bank business customers have been overcharged at some time

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and that the average overcharge amounts to about £4,000. Those figures have been in the public domain in recent years and have not been countered with evidence from the banks.

High street banks claim to have approximately 3.2 million business customers. The Department of Trade and Industry says that, out of a total of 3.7 million business, 3.5 million are described as microbusinesses—small businesses, which employ fewer than 10 people. It follows that the majority of bank business customers must be small or microbusinesses. The banks will not reveal the proportion of their customers who have bank borrowing, and use overdrafts and loans. However, it is fair to suppose that businesses use bank borrowing for cash flow and other purposes.

If we make a conservative estimate that 50 per cent. of businesses use bank borrowing and apply the figures that I mentioned—75 per cent. of business customers overcharged an average of £4,000—it suggests a staggering total of £4.8 billion in overcharges. If 80 per cent. of business customers use bank borrowing, the total in overcharges is £7.7 billion. Those amounts are shocking. Doubtless, some people will be sceptical, and I do not ask anyone to accept the figures blindly. There is credible, verifiable evidence of a serious problem of bank overcharging in this country; it should be put to the test.

I want to consider what is meant by overcharging. Don Cruickshank, who is chairman of the independent Treasury review of banking services in the United Kingdom, has identified an absence of competition in the sector, especially among those that offer services to small businesses. In an uncompetitive market, it is likely that we will find uncompetitive pricing. That is a definition of overcharging. However, the overcharging identified by some customers and the specialist recovery firms to which I referred is different.

We are considering circumstances in which the advertised rate is not the rate that is applied to the customer. The advertised rate may be competitive, perhaps 5 per cent., but, on later inspection, the applied rate turns out to be 8 per cent. Overcharging does not appear in an identifiable way in accounts. Other devices include calculating interest on wrong overdraft limits; applying penalty rates that should not have been applied; and charging hidden management fees. All those devices have been used without informing the customer. That is not only uncompetitive practice; it is sharp practice.

The question is not whether such practices happen, but to what extent they happen. I would welcome testing the available evidence and gathering more. That should be done through an independent investigation commissioned by the Government. It should be done because strong evidence, beyond prima facie indications, exists of a significant and unjustified diversion of resources from businesses to banks. That can only harm the productive economy and employment prospects in this country. It represents appalling, unethical, socially irresponsible business practice, which is a national scandal and an abuse of trust.

May I draw briefly from the executive summary of British invisibles 1997 report on banking? To paraphrase, the banking industry operating in the UK is a crucial and integral part of the UK economy. The sector consists of UK and foreign banks operating in the UK and its broad customer base encompasses individuals, companies and public sector organisations. The industry's assets are well in excess of £2,000 billion. Slightly under half are held by the UK banks, which are dominated by the high street retail banks. I am not arguing with any of that. The banks are a crucial and integral part of the economy and most people's lives. It is right, therefore, to expect that they are efficient, competitive and transparent and that they serve their customers and the country well, deal straight with people, charge them fairly and, as a result, earn and are worthy of their trust. It seems that all the high street banks, in varying degrees, have overcharged at one time or another, and not only as a result of human error. Of course there is human error, but if that were the principal cause of overcharging one would expect there to be plenty of gainers as well as losers. The bank audit industry is absolutely convinced that that is not the case.

I have described what is meant by overcharging. The process also involves going into denial if and when a customer inquires or complains. There is, so I understand, a clear pattern of making excuses and saying that there is insufficient staff time to investigate. Paperwork has been lost or never existed. Progress is slow and grudging and, at some point, a partial refund is offered. After a year or so, a fuller amount may be offered to those customers who have survived the obstacle course. May I refer to an example of that?

In February 1997, Anglia Business Associates lodged a claim on behalf of a family-owned engineering business based in North Yorkshire that had been overcharged by more than £15,500. The bank's immediate response was to say that its own review of the account showed not an overcharge, but an undercharge of £650. A month later, however, it changed its mind and offered a refund of slightly more than £4,000 in full and final settlement, stating categorically that it had not made an error. After being pressed to reconsider, three months later the bank's final settlement was raised to £5,700. A little later, it was raised to £6,000 and later still there was a breakthrough to £13,000. Finally, in January 1998—almost a year after the claim was first lodged—it was raised to £15,200, which was about £500 short of the refund originally asked for. Time after time, in every letter that it wrote, the bank stressed that it had not made any mistakes at all. That is interesting: it had not made an error, but was prepared to give money away to its customer if it asked hard enough.

I am sure that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are aware that concern about bank overcharging and other matters in respect of the relationship between banks and their customers has been in the public domain for a long time—well over 20 years—and is not exactly new. It is remarkable that it has not been firmly addressed. Pressure from the National Consumer Council led to the banks setting up and sponsoring the voluntary banking ombudsman scheme in 1986. It has become clear that the scheme is somewhat weak. For example, it cannot recommend on policy or make rules for the banking industry. It can deal only with individual complaints, and does so only if and when all the internal procedures

of the banks have been exhausted and if the matter is deadlocked, but the banks can be pretty expert in delaying the internal investigation of complaints. The ombudsman scheme as currently formulated therefore turns away a high percentage of complaints.

As I interpret the presentation of the banking ombudsman's 1997–98 annual report, which is the most recent I could find, he received almost 20,000 concern calls on his helpline and 12,000 written complaints. Conciliation settled 960 before formal investigation and 630 went through formal investigation. The indications from that are that thousands of complaints and potential complaints are not being addressed through that route. Another initial weakness of the scheme was that it was limited to personal customers and unincorporated businesses. Continuing public pressure in the 1980s led to the then Conservative Government setting up a Treasury review into banking services—the Jack committee, which reported in 1989.

The Jack committee recommended that the banks adopt a code of practice, that the ombudsman scheme be extended to cover incorporated businesses and that it be made statutory. The then Government rejected the latter two recommendations and the banking code was not introduced until 1992. It is voluntary and not all the banks signed up to it. Those that did are prepared sometimes—perhaps too often—to ignore it, as well as their own company versions of it. In 1991, again in response to representations from small businesses, the public and Members of the House, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer asked the Bank of England to carry out a survey of lending to small businesses. The concern was that cuts in base rates were not being passed on to small business customers.

As part of the outcome of that survey, the Chancellor asked the banks to suggest a code of conduct for small business customers. That is also part of the scene. By 1993, continuing public pressure led to him asking the Bank of England to repeat its survey of bank lending to small firms and, in addition, he agreed to the recommendation of the Jack committee of 1988 that the banking ombudsman scheme should include small incorporated businesses. He accepted, however, the banks' recommendation that that should be restricted to businesses with a turnover of less than £1 million a year, which is not a huge amount for a successful small business. That means that the only option for many small businesses, apart from involving a specialist firm, is legal action, which is an expensive and difficult route for them and for individuals. Only the banks are properly equipped to pursue it.

It is fair to say that, although the issue of alleged overcharging has been around for a long time, it has managed to avoid being put under the rigorous scrutiny of the Government and the regulatory authorities. The usual response has been that charges are a matter for the banks—which exercise their commercial judgment—not for action under competition legislation, and should be resolved through their internal procedures or the banking ombudsman. I am an optimist and I am pleased to sense that there are indications that the worrying and unsatisfactory state of affairs that I have described could at last be effectively addressed. As part of the general context of that, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has recognised the poor deal on prices that British customers get in a number of areas, compared with those on the continent and in the United States. He has promised action, for example on international price comparisons for cars.

With regard to the banking industry, the interim report of the independent review chaired by Don Cruickshank, which is due to report soon, was published last July and was responded to by the Government in the form of changes to the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which was then in Committee. One of the positive features of a very long and complex Bill is the proposed one-stop shop statutory financial ombudsman scheme, combining and replacing eight schemes, including that of the banking ombudsman. Unlike the voluntary scheme, it is proposed that the decisions of the new ombudsman will be binding on respondents, which is helpful. The new scheme provides us with a golden opportunity to address the weaknesses of the previous arrangement. There are two areas to which I wish to draw attention.

First, there is a failure to address thousands of complaints. I have no objection to requiring that a customer with a complaint first puts it to the bank for consideration by its internal procedures under its customer code; that makes complete sense. However, the new financial services ombudsman will need to be mindful of the techniques too often deployed by banks before a state of deadlock is agreed in writing.

Secondly, it is important that the ombudsman seeks to improve voluntary customer codes. The banking code, to which I have referred, is, so I understand, drawn from a number of banks and building societies, and tends to reflect the lowest common denominator rather than standards that might best serve the customer. In dealing with complaints over the years, it is essential that the new ombudsman scheme looks to raise standards and improve codes. My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary knows that I have raised that point with her in Committee, and I ask her to reflect further on it today.

There is also the key matter of regulation. Banks are regulated by the Financial Services Authority with regard to capital structure and their accounts, and to ensuring that they are run by fit and proper persons. Although the FSA is developing and is very much encouraged and required to develop an outlook more mindful of the customer—to become more customer-friendly—the regulation of banks does not include pricing, or matters that might be seen as relevant to a consumer watchdog. Indeed, there is no consumer watchdog for bank customers. The financial services ombudsman is intended not to act as a consumer watchdog but to be impartial in reaching balanced decisions. That ought to lead to a consideration of how such a state of affairs could be addressed.

How about having "Ofbank"—an office of banking? Ofbank could be an independent banking regulator, complete, perhaps, with regional customer services committees and a national customer council, charged with advising the regulator on policy issues. Such a development would tune in with the independent banking review's observations that the UK banking sector lacks competition—a position strongly supported by the Consumers Association.

Other regulators, such as the Office of Water Services, the Office of Electricity Regulation and the Office of Telecommunications, were introduced because of the

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obvious monopolistic nature of the privatised utilities created by the previous Government. There is not enough competition among banks. The degree of regulation would of course reflect the extent of the competition and, where competition develops, a light touch may be all that is necessary.

It is the intention of the Financial Services and Markets Bill to create the legal base for innovation, competition and greater efficiency in financial services, but until that happens in the UK banking sector, Ofbank will have a job to do.

There is one other major issue that I want to raise. It is clear, is it not, that I believe bank overcharging to be a serious problem; I want it to stop. If it were to cease from today, what would be done about the past? Customers have been overcharged and that needs to be addressed, just as the mis-selling of personal pensions during the first part of the 1990s is slowly and steadily being addressed. It is worth recalling that a final total of—perhaps—1.8 million cases will have been examined in trying to resolve the mis-selling scandal, and that compensation of between £5.3 billion and £7.6 billion may have to be paid.

I ask the Government to do six things: first, to acknowledge that there is a problem of bank overcharging, particularly on small business accounts; secondly, to commission an independent investigation to examine the evidence and establish the scale of the problem nationally; thirdly, and somewhat dependent on the outcome of the investigation, to take proactive, effective measures to compensate customers for past overcharging; fourthly, to create the legal and regulatory framework in which effective competition can take place; fifthly, to ensure that the financial services ombudsman seeks to improve the banking code; and sixthly, to give serious consideration to the establishment of a bank regulator who encompasses the role of consumer watchdog.

I do not expect my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to be able to agree to all of that today, but I ask her to give all the matters very careful thought. I am asking for nothing less than a new deal for bank customers—without whom banks would not exist—which serves the British people and British business and makes it absolutely clear, once and for all, that the practice of bank overcharging is unacceptable, intolerable and must cease.

11.27 am

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): I am pleased to be able to make a short contribution to this important debate. I should first declare an interest, as recorded in the Register of Members' Interests. Secondly, I apologise to the hon. Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) and the Minister because, owing to a long-standing engagement just after 12 o'clock, I may not be present for the winding-up speech

I feel that I have been brought on my first outing to Westminster Hall on false pretences. I thought that this debate was about competition, regulation and the review of the banking sector. The issue of competition crept lightly into the hon. Gentleman's comments, but only in rather scornful terms; regulation did not feature much; and Don Cruickshank was mentioned just twice. Instead, we heard something of a bank-bashing session.

I was interested to read the press release that the hon. Gentleman issued in advance of the debate. To give him his due, he referred to Anglia Business Associates, to which it might be helpful to allude further. It seems that that company is the basis for the hon. Gentleman's raising this subject. Although it might be seen in his eyes to be providing a public service, it is a commercial, profit-making organisation, which makes its money by taking a 35 per cent. cut of any money that it is able to retain on behalf of clients whose cases against banks it takes on. That should be put on record.

The press release describes the organisation's fairly alarmist claim that in excess of £5 billion has been wrongly extracted from clients of banks over a number of years: 35 per cent. of £5 billion makes Anglia Business Associates a rather wealthy company.

It would be interesting to hear more about who regulates that company and whether they are acting in the best interests of customers and the whole banking sector. The hon. Gentleman's press release refers to a Mr. Mark Radin, who I believe is the owner of the company, and gives his phone number for further inquiries.

I am no great fan of retail banks, and indeed I would be the first to admit that they have been exceedingly hapless with their public relations over a number of years, especially on the subject of charges. They certainly gained a very poor reputation in the recessions of the 1980s and early 1990s for the way in which they treated small businesses. They were greatly at fault, although the matter may not have been quite as one-sided as the hon. Gentleman made out. On average, the banks made a 21 per cent. return on their equity, so they were very successful.

The British banking sector accounts for about 4.2 per cent. of the UK economy and last year paid more than £4.5 billion in tax to the Exchequer, so there is no denying its importance. Because of the common poor perception of the sector, the Chancellor announced an independent review into its working on 3 November 1998 under Don Cruickshank, as the hon. Gentleman said.

The remit of the review was to consider the UK banking industry, with the exception of investment banking; to examine the levels of competition, innovation and efficiency in various sub-markets, and especially the relationship with small and medium-sized enterprises; and to make international comparisons. In January 1999, a consultation document was produced. For all the qualms about the extent of co-operation from the banking sector, it took a great deal of work on the part of commercial banks to provide the information that was required to make the review meaningful.

In April 1999, a progress note was issued by Mr. Cruickshank and the review was widened to include e-commerce. Specific teams were set up to deal with the subject of small businesses in deprived areas and their interaction with the banking sector. Perhaps most notably, in July 1999 Mr. Cruickshank produced an interesting interim report, focusing on the dynamic interaction between competition law and banking regulation, and making six main recommendations designed to ensure that competition considerations are more closely factored into the regulatory process.

The theory is that in future competition problems should be less likely to occur if the possible effects of regulatory decisions on banking competition are the subject of more rigorous scrutiny at the time when they are made. There was also discussion of the future role of the Competition Commission, taking advice from the Office of Fair Trading.

The publication of the report was timely for those of us, including my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) and the hon. Member for Bedford, who have served for many, many months on the Standing Committee considering the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which is to continue its path through the House next week. The Conservative Opposition closely agreed with the comments made by Don Cruickshank.

Indeed, the *Official Report* of our deliberations in Standing Committee A shows that the Conservative Opposition tabled amendments specifically to promote competition in the UK financial services industry—which includes banking—and international competitiveness. Amendment No. 46 dealt with the objective—an objective rather than just a principle—of competition, to include

"the maintenance of competition and promotion of United Kingdom competitiveness".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 8 July 1999; c. 42.]

We also tabled two new clauses defining the whole subject. Interestingly, in all our sittings—I was at virtually all of them—no comment was made by the hon. Member for Bedford on that subject, which overlaps neatly with today's debate. Indeed, it is clearly recorded that on 8 July the hon. Gentleman voted against proposals that would have included a competition objective and a competitiveness requirement in the Financial Services Authority. Where did his new-found interest in competition come from? When we could have done something tangible about it, by influencing relevant legislation, he had nothing to say and voted against our proposals.

The most important factor that would allay the fears that the hon. Gentleman and many others quite reasonably share is the promotion of competition in the UK banking sector. Conservative Members' entire approach to the Financial Services Authority has been to limit the impeding by regulation of the financial services industry.

There are something in excess of 560 banks in the City of London, including many foreign banks, many of which offer private banking facilities and any of which can apply for licences to set up as banks offering current accounts. There are in excess of 43 banks ordinarily offering current accounts in this country, and myriad other providers of other products along similar lines.

Such services are offered not only by the traditional banks but by the demutualised building societies, by an increasing number of credit unions—we would certainly encourage the freeing up of that sector, which plays a key role—and, perhaps most significantly of all, by the burgeoning internet services, which are proving to be extremely successful in the banking climate.

Only yesterday, the results from Prudential, which owns Egg, were published. In the space of about a year, Egg has brought in about £7.6 billion of private money on deposit, gained more than 800,000 depositors—bringing in an extra 100,000 in the final quarter of 1999 alone—and built up an asset book in excess of £2 billion. It has been enormously successful by being competitive and offering low or nil charges and preferential rates of interest. Like any other commercial company with a banking licence in this country, it is perfectly at liberty to do that. It is accessible to anybody who chooses to gain access to it and has the money to bank with it.

Similarly, Virgin is setting up a successful internet banking business. There is also much greater access for foreign banks—this has been a consideration in the Financial Services and Markets Bill—to offer facilities to British customers at competitive rates. The number of credit card providers has doubled in the past six years alone.

It is not only traditional banking houses that offer facilities to individuals. Largely with the approval of the Government—I agree with them—supermarkets such as Sainsbury's and Tesco and even car manufacturing companies are offering banking facilities to members of the public. It is interesting to note that, perhaps as a dry run, when the Government launched their initial hapless proposals on individual savings accounts in 1997, they strongly promoted new forms of providers, to increase competition in the banking sector and encourage savings schemes such as ISAs to excess.

Of course, ISAs have been an enormous disaster in terms of bringing in new investors, but that is the marketplace. The market has shown that the product is defective. The product will succeed only if there is a multiplicity of providers offering different products and services that appeal to different people.

Everything that the hon. Gentleman has, justifiably, said today, could be resolved to a large extent by the greater promotion of competition, for which Conservative Members have been arguing for a long time. In practice, there is more competition because of all the new providers entering the market. The hon. Gentleman would do better to concentrate on the prime considerations: the transparency of information on the availability of those products; greater upfront transparency on charges and agreement to them, which has happened since voluntary codes of banking practice came in in 1992; greater product innovation, which will only be hampered by excessive regulation, as has happened in other countries; and, greater moves towards making accounts portable and mobile.

The greatest incentive for a bank not to charge excessively is the power of the customer to say, "I don't like the service or the level of charges that you are imposing and I will take my account elsewhere." Some work could be done to improve the mobility of accounts, in particular when one is tied up with direct debits and such like. Those are the considerations to which the hon. Member for Bedford would do best to direct his ire.

I have no doubt that in future there will be a much tougher regime for banks that promote uncompetitive practices under the competition laws—for example, through the greater powers that are being given to the Competition Commission, the campaigns against so-called "Rip-off Britain", or whatever soundbite one wants to use. However, the marketplace and the greater mobility of customers will help most of all, in particular during the next few years as the way in which financial services operate changes radically.

[Mr. Tim Loughton]

The hon. Gentleman's six-point plan contained little if anything about those considerations. He said that the Government should acknowledge that bank overcharging is a problem. There has been acknowledgement of a problem with bank charges—or the perception of them—which is why the Cruickshank commission was set up. The hon. Gentleman asked for an independent investigation. One would hope that the Cruickshank review has some degree of independence—certainly some of the comments in Mr. Cruickshank's interim report in July grated with what the Chancellor had said days earlier, but the Government have not so far been amenable to accepting our amendments to the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

The hon. Gentleman asked for compensation for past overcharging. Banking codes have existed since the early 1990s and it does no one any service to rake back over the past 10 or 15 years to prove that, in what was a different environment, banks should have been liable for all those charges. That would provoke a scandal like the pensions mis-selling scandal, on a massive and wholly impractical scale.

The hon. Gentleman also asked that a legal and regulatory base be created within which effective competition can take place. The Competition Commission and what Mr. Cruickshank is trying to do will deal with part of that problem. Furthermore, the hon. Gentleman asked that the new financial services ombudsman should improve the banking code, and he came out with the extraordinary statement that the ombudsman is not there to act in the interests of the consumer. The entire Financial Services Authority is there to act on and safeguard the financial interests of consumers, so that demonstrates a basic misunderstanding on the hon. Gentleman's part.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman said that we need yet another "Of-organisation"—an "Ofbank." We have the FSA, the Bank of England and the Competition Commission. We do not want yet another tier of regulation which could succeed only in stifling competition, which would result in fewer players in the market, fewer products, and less innovation. That could mean only that choice for the consumer and the charges that go with such choice would be diminished, which is not what we are trying to achieve.

This debate has been disappointing because of the way in which the hon. Gentleman moved it. It does no one any good simply to bash the banks and to hark back many years. If the Government are to succeed in many areas, such as saving schemes and the regional venture capital fund that they want to promote, it is important for them to liaise with the banks. The banking sector is vital to the economy. Many things have gone wrong and many need to get better, but it is competition, above all, that will bring that about.

11.44 am

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) on securing this important Adjournment debate. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) was somewhat mean spirited in his response. If he thinks that my hon. Friend was bank bashing, he should listen carefully to my contribution.

I shall concentrate on the on-going review of banking services and the fact that the network of rural and district bank branches is shrinking fast. In doing so, I shall draw on the excellent contribution made by the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) to his debate on financial services on 15 December, which also elicited a response from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. I also want to demonstrate the concern felt by all hon. Members regardless of party—expressed in early-day motion 822, which attracted about 89 signatures, and early-day motion 962—about the lack of availability of banking and financial services and the worrying pace of district bank branch closures.

I have had direct experience of the sheer lack of concern shown for the elderly and disabled customers of Lloyds TSB in my constituency. Last summer, Lloyds TSB introduced an ill-fated pilot scheme, which completely removed cashier services from four branches in the Reading area. It showed no concern for the elderly or the disabled. How are blind people supposed to use a fully automated bank branch? How are the disabled supposed to access some of the services via what are known as ATMs? What small business can tolerate a system that will offer only £200 in cash? What jobbing builder can operate in this day and age on only £200 per day for building materials? What small shops can cope with the loss of a day's interest on their deposits as a result of it taking four days to clear cheques and deposits as opposed to three when one deposits over the counter?

Only after an extremely high-profile and vigorous campaign, which I brought to this place, supported by local people and also ably supported by our local newspaper, the *Reading Chronicle*, was Lloyds TSB, the largest and most profitable of our banks, forced to back down and reinstate the cashier service.

I worry that that bank's ill-fated pilot scheme in Reading is simply a nasty glimpse into the future. Robots may well replace people in banking. The disabled, the disadvantaged and those living outside the large town centres would then be denied local access to a range of financial services. That is called financial exclusion and the Government need to lead the way in tackling that serious threat to the quality of life of many of our constituents.

The branch network of Britain's retail banks is shrinking as I speak. More than 4,000 branches of high street banks have closed in the past 10 years and the independent consultant, Deloitte, predicts that a similar number will close in the next five years, which is a significant quickening of the pace of closure. Barclays announced 200 more closures starting this month and, if last Sunday's *The Mail on Sunday* is to be believed, although I accept that it is not always right, Barclays' new Canadian chief executive, Matthew Barrett, is likely to announce a further round of closures with the bank's results next month.

NatWest has announced a further 200 closures as part of its defence against the Scottish take-over bids and for Lloyds TSB the closures are a continuing process. The closures are hardly likely to stop there. For a growing number of communities in rural areas, urban suburbs and inner-city areas, the result is a complete loss of local banking representation.

The campaign for community banking services, with which many hon. Members have been in touch in the past few years and which acts as the voice of 24 of some

of the country's best-known charities and trade organisations, has forecast that at least another 1,000 communities will become bankless if present trends continue unabated.

The lack of local banking services impacts most heavily on the vulnerable, the elderly and disabled and on shopkeepers and small business people. It also impacts on those on low incomes or without the use of a car. For many, the lack of such services can mean not only inconvenience but major difficulties—early loss of financial independence and exclusion from mainstream financial services. For the shopkeeper, it often means lost turnover, as the more mobile go elsewhere for banking and take their shopping needs with them. Some of those businesses then have to close, and the lifeblood is drained from our district, rural and inner-city communities.

My hon. Friend the Minister should appreciate that, beyond the obvious problems, there are serious implications for community sustainability and environmental damage, as many are forced to use their cars to travel further—not only for their banking needs, but to shop for items that were previously available within their local communities. The situation will undoubtedly get worse as the full effects of the current takeover battle in the retail banking sector are felt. Frankly, it is spurious for the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham to claim that the market will be the answer to all our needs. Clearly, it will not, and there is a need for Government action and intervention.

The Government's current attitude—which seems to be to leave the question of branch closures to self-regulation—worries hon. Members, including myself. Self-regulation by an industry in turmoil, driven by the desire to slash costs and increase profits, is likely to achieve little.

Let us look at the banks' record on self-regulation. NatWest gave five weeks' notice to close the only branch in Killamarsh in Derbyshire, which has a population of some 10,000. That was done just before Christmas in 1998. The bank refused to listen to the concerns of thousands of local people. I have referred to the tactics and behaviour of Lloyds TSB in my constituency. The company was quite happy to remove the last bank from the village of Theale in my constituency, and it moved to the self-service, fully automated scheme with no consultation with its customers—those stakeholders who provided the bank's record £3.2 billion profit last year. The village of Wheathampstead in Hertfordshire—featured in the BBC's "Panorama" programme in October—was deserted by Barclays at only two weeks' notice, either side of an August bank holiday.

So much for self-regulation—so much for community consultation. So much for giving a damn about the interests of the people who made those banks so successful and profitable. Can the industry be trusted to self-regulate? I think not.

Mr. Loughton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Salter: No, I will not.

In anticipation of what the social exclusion unit's policy action team might say, we have seen token experiments in social banking being planned by individual banks in half a dozen deprived areas—notably Portsmouth and Salford. By their own admission, the banks concerned see these merely as expensive one-off experiments. That is not much help for the hundreds—soon to be thousands—of communities throughout Britain who are losing their banks.

Three quarters of the cases brought to the notice of the campaign for community banking services over the last two years were not in deprived areas. What sort of help will those token social banking schemes be to middle England, or to rural areas in Scotland or Wales?

I make a plea to my hon. Friend the Minister that she, unlike her predecessor, finds time to meet representatives of the campaign for community banking services, which has been requesting such a meeting since January 1999. If not, will she at least meet hon. Members, such as myself, who are in the process of establishing an all-party campaign for community banking? Why is provision not being made in the Financial Services and Markets Bill to give the Financial Services Authority at least reserve powers regarding local access to basic banking services?

I thoroughly endorse the six points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford in his measured and thoughtful speech. I believe that we have made the case for a banking regulator to guarantee access to financial services, and to tackle head-on the growing menace of the exclusion of hundreds of thousands of people from financial services.

11.54 am

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) on securing this debate. It is important because it puts an increasing focus on banking, particularly the relationship between banking and the small and medium-sized business sector. That is particularly important, because more than 90 per cent. of new jobs are generated through small and medium-sized enterprises. The success of SMEs depends very much on their access to finance, whether venture capital or financial services. The banks have a particular role to play in that respect.

Historically, banks have failed the SME sector in this country by failing to provide funding for small businesses, and by their lack of support in their day-to-day dealings. They have failed also to understand the needs of businesses in areas such as access to cash, cash flow and the ability to give support and advice that are valid and helpful, without the people receiving that support finding that they are then liable for large bills that they did not know about and find difficult to meet.

The initiative for finding funding for SMEs has come not from the banking sector, but from outside. Principally among those outside sources is the much-derided local government sector. I was leader of Lancashire county council between 1981 and 1997, and one of our major policy innovations was to find a way in which the public and private sectors could work together to support businesses. Specifically, we found a way in which venture and loan capital could be supplied to small businesses which the banks had abandoned and, in many cases, had not even tried to help.

In 1986, through Lancashire Enterprises, now Enterprises plc—the county's economic development company—we set up the Rosebud fund. The fund was

[Mrs. Louise Ellman]

one of the first attempts to assist small businesses. It made—and still makes—loans to small businesses. Those loans were at times as small as £1,000, but, typically, they have reached £100,000 and £200,000. Those funds were then matched with funding from other sources and, in the years since the fund started, more than 260 investments have been made, over £3.5 million has been invested in small businesses in the Lancashire economy—which otherwise would not have received support—and 5,000 jobs have been supported.

The fund was set up with the support of the European Commission through European objective 2 funding. It was innovative—it still is—in that it showed how small businesses could be supported on a commercial basis. The secret of the fund's success is that finance is provided in an appropriate way and on appropriate terms, and is linked to specialist business advice. Firms—particularly small firms—that found themselves in difficulties after the first year or two are able to secure re-financing and have access to proper advice in a way that helps them to prosper.

The Rosebud fund was needed because the banking sector had failed small businesses. Since that time, parts of the banking sector have tried to step into that gap—in a variable way, but with some success. Other funds involving banks, such as the Local Investment Fund, have attempted to assist in localised, poor areas. Organisations such as the Prince's Trust do very good work, and the innovative Merseyside investment fund, using European objective 1 funding, has invested—together with other finance generated—£62 million to support 4,000 jobs in the Merseyside area.

Those schemes were required because of the failings of the banking sector. The ideas started in the 1980s through, in my case, Lancashire county council have been picked up through the new regional development agencies. The agencies are looking at setting up their own venture capital funds, geared particularly to the needs of small and medium-sized businesses. I am glad to note that Barclays has said that it will be willing to invest in the North West regional development agency's regional fund. I also pay tribute to the work that the Co-operative bank has done in identifying the banking sector with the needs of small businesses.

When we think about small businesses, the possibilities of community and co-operative businesses are often ignored. Through co-operative development agencies and the Industrial Common Ownership Fund, attempts have been made to find funding for co-operative development. That is another area in which the banking sector, apart from the Co-operative bank and—to a limited extent—one or two others, has ignored the needs of small and new businesses. I hope that, in the future, the banks will pay more attention to those needs.

Businesses need access to capital through banks, but they must also have day-to-day dealings with the banks. My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford has drawn attention to many of the problems that businesses and individuals face in their daily operations. Banks are often not friendly to small businesses. They often do not understand the cash flow needs of small businesses or understand the problems that charges for cash deposits impose on small businesses, especially the smallest. The consumer, whether a business or an individual, is often unclear about the rate of interest being charged. All too often, small businesses undertake the necessary consultations with banks, but then face a large, unexpected bill, often to the small businesses' detriment.

I support my hon. Friend's proposals for openness, support and clarity for the consumer. The Consumer Association has conducted surveys and drawn attention to the similarities in the difficulties faced by small businesses and consumers in their dealings with banks. The association also points to the difficulties that many consumers believe they would face in changing their bank if they can find a better service. Sometimes, changing banks is not as complex as it is made out to be. The association has performed an important role in drawing attention to those areas, and has assessed of the appropriateness of the different services offered by the banks according to the varying needs of their clients. There is a need for clear information, whether for individual consumers or for small businesses, on the various services offered by different banks and the charges imposed. I support any initiative that will bring more clarity to that information and make it more readily available to the consumer.

I agreed with my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) when he expressed disappointment with the comments made by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton), who seemed more concerned about defending banking interests than considering the needs of small businesses and the community. I cannot share his view that the only problem is lack of competition in some sectors. Banks have responsibilities, and they must meet them—preferably by following Government guidance. If that does not work, regulation may be required.

Banks are an important part of our economy and our society. They are rightly under scrutiny because they have failed, and in many cases still fail, the needs of small businesses. Banks also have consumer and community responsibilities. In a recent statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor spoke about his intention to set up new investment funds in areas of particular deprivation, including one in my constituency in Liverpool. Those funds will be extremely important and will take their place with other funds that are directed to those particular needs. However, the businesses set up through the availability of such funds—like other businesses—can be successful only if they have continuing access to sympathetic and reasonable banking services.

So far, banks have not faced up to their responsibilities. I hope that they will do so under the new scrutiny of their dealings with the commercial sector, which is important in generating our economy, and with consumers in general, who are important to our society.

12.6 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): This is an important debate because it raises serious issues and heralds the full Cruickshank report, which is expected by the end of June. Two important specific issues were also raised by the hon. Members for Bedford (Mr. Hall) and for Reading, West (Mr. Salter). All of us will have met constituents with problems in both

categories. I sympathise particularly with those problems raised by the hon. Member for Reading, West, because my rural constituency suffers from similar problems.

Better competition is not the full answer, but it is an important part of it, as has been demonstrated in the United States of America. Another issue is exactly how the FSA will regulate banks. Despite the monumental nature of the Financial Services and Markets Bill, which has 378 clauses and deals in detail with many issues, the actual banking regulation that the FSA will deliver remains to be considered.

My biggest concern is that the Cruickshank report will be subject to too much spin. The Government will say that the report proves that they are doing something about the issue, but the report will be sidelined. That has already begun to happen, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton) pointed out. We have consistently argued that competition should be an objective of the Financial Services and Markets Bill; the FSA is not too keen to focus on it. It has been made clear that the FSA will focus on the objectives laid down in the Bill, and that the principles are considered secondary to the objectives. The Treasury has been successful in heading off Cruickshank's intention, which we share, and has replaced it with competition arrangements that are weak by comparison, albeit worth having.

I was slightly uncomfortable to note that the hon. Member for Bedford focused on data produced by a particular organisation. We all admit that mischarging problems exist, but to quantify them as an amount for compensation is not the best approach. The new ombudsman scheme will address complaints more effectively, and I agree that he or she should review the banking code. I hope that the combined ombudsman will be more effective than the single banking ombudsman arrangements and that the relevant staff at the FSA will read the report of this debate, because it relates to the banking regulatory activities that they will undertake.

If we focus on the competitiveness of the market place, there are arguments both ways, but at the macro level there is a powerful case of insufficient competitiveness, because financial intermediation in the banking system is still enormously expensive. As a cost, it is 4 to 5 per cent. of assets. In the United States mutual fund industry, which has become as big a financial intermediator as the banks, it is about 1.5 per cent. One of the main reasons why the US has been much more successful is its ability to offer money funds that compete with bank deposits. That is not possible in this country, largely because of EU regulation, under which money funds may not account on what is called an amortisation basis. I have to say that, to protect their own position, German banks have not wanted to permit money funds to get off the ground. I have banged on about that for some time, and shall continue to do so, as I believe it extremely important to have competing money funds, as happens in the US.

The lender of last resort doctrine has also encouraged concentration. The original doctrine was that the central bank should stand behind any bank that was well run, whether large or small. That no longer prevails, and the market has been forced to conclude that the central bank—the lender of last resort—will stand behind only those banks that are so big that they cannot be allowed to fail. The resulting net reduction in smaller banks has led to increasing consolidation in the banking industry.

Conversely, the argument that banks' return on equity has risen constantly over the past decade is slightly unfair. The starting level was very low, and banks have had very low levels of bad debts for the past seven years, largely as a result of this country's economic success since 1992 and of the golden economic legacy bequeathed by the previous Government to the present Government. However, that situation will change in due course: I am afraid that the Chancellor is deluding himself if he thinks that he has abolished business cycles.

New competitive banks have emerged, such as Virgin, and Egg, which has £7.6 billion in deposits. Barclays bank has noted that it had lost 30 per cent. of the credit card market and now has only 10 per cent. The banking industry here is more productive and competitive than that in France or Germany. In principle, the internet ought to be a major vehicle for more competition, but will customers or providers benefit from the cost savings? That is the big question.

One problem for banking regulators and central banks is the fear of systemic risk. The last time that a Government really tried to get banking competition going was in the early 1970s. Hon. Members may recollect that that was followed by the 1974 banking crisis and the Bank of England's "lifeboat" to rescue a total systemic threat to our banking system.

That period of difficulty came about because lots of new, small banks founds that, although they could obtain deposits by paying high interest rates, their lending risks were high. When the economy turned down, those banks had appalling bad debts and the structure proved to be a house of cards. Regulators therefore have a bias in favour of cartels, which they feel they can manage more effectively against systemic risk, but a balance has to be struck.

I am slightly worried about the new banks that are joint ventures with supermarkets. They are not really new banks, but will be more partnerships between a supermarket and an existing large bank. Will that really provide competition? The Prudential, for example, is already a major financial services business.

Market entry remains a problem. The questions of who can be a bank and of what a bank is have not been clearly defined. Money transmission charges are high, and the relevant organisations operate to some extent as a cartel, representing a barrier to entry. In addition, there are high capital adequacy costs on change of control. Overall, banking concentration is increasing and will manifest itself on a pan-European basis, rather than merely in the domestic economy.

The hon. Member for Reading, West used the phrase "financial exclusion". I dislike that phrase, which I consider to be a politically correct usage, but the problems set out by the hon. Gentleman are real and need to be addressed. I was amazed when my own bank wrote to me to tell me that I could no longer get cash over the counter and that I had to use a machine. I wondered what a bank was for if it was not obliged to dispense my own cash back to me. The incident led me to believe that the services that banks provide might be determined when banking licences are granted. That could be a lever to help tackle some of the issues.

[Mr. Howard Flight]

The large banks would be foolish if they did not take the initiative in addressing those needs, but that will depend in part on the seriousness with which the Government address the issues raised in the Cruickshank report. However, it is only fair that large banks with greater powers should address some of the community issues that have arisen.

The hon. Member for Bedford made some specific points towards the end of his speech. I consider that overcharging must come within the territory of the competent ombudsman. The concept of following the phase 1 and phase 2 pension model is not practical; the necessary regulations do not exist to do so. I do not think that it is legally possible—even were it desirable—to do what the hon. Gentleman proposes in terms of a total financial compensation deal. The territory is for the ombudsman and a review of the banking code. We are awaiting the independent investigation, but the crucial political question is whether the Government will act in earnest or will sideline the findings of the Cruickshank investigation.

The matter of separate regulation arose. The Conservative party has expressed doubts about including banking in the remit of the Financial Services Authority. The US model, the Securities and Exchange Commission, deals with securities and related industries only. However, the decision has been taken, and it does not permit establishing a separate body that might be called Ofbank. The important question is whether banking regulation will simply combine the roles previously taken by the Bank of England and other central banks, or will be wider. The key to that is a more competitive banking environment.

I look to the US model in this matter. It is not perfect, but the US banking system is more competitive and delivers customer needs better than the system here, and substantially better than the system in continental Europe. I believe that the biggest enemy of banking competition is European Union banking regulation, which retains a major element of support for cartels. This debate also reveals one significant point—the importance of the initiative that the FSA will have in formulating its activities and objectives in the area of banking regulation.

12.18 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): It is a pleasure to be able to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mr. Hall) on securing this Adjournment debate. He and other hon. Members have raised important matters, and the debate comes at an opportune moment.

First, I shall outline some of the background themes of this important issue. The financial services industry is one of the UK's success stories, accounting for 7 per cent. of national income and employing more than 1 million people. Increasingly, financial services are a key component of local economies throughout the UK. The work force survey shows that, of the 450,000 extra jobs created over the past year, one in three was in the financial services sector. The message is clear that financial services is a growth industry for many regional centres as well as for the City of London.

Within the general financial services sector, the UK banking industry plays a central role in the economy. A modern economy depends on effective and efficient relationships between its savers and borrowers and its financial services industry. Firms need the investment that the banking industry provides. They also need the financial markets, on which they can raise the capital that enables them to invest, grow and create jobs.

High levels of innovation, competition and efficiency are vital to an effective banking system and essential for meeting the productivity challenge. That is why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford said, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his pre-Budget report in November 1998 a review of the services provided by the United Kingdom banking sector.

The Government had a genuinely open mind on the issue, but a number of concerns have been expressed similar to those articulated so well by my hon. Friend about whether the United Kingdom banking industry fully meets the high levels of competition necessary. The review, announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and chaired by Don Cruickshank, was established to examine the innovation, competition and efficiency in various sub-markets of the banking industry, including lending to small and medium-sized enterprises, to compare them with international standards and to consider possible options for change.

Don Cruickshank published his interim report in July last year. He noted that it was crucial to get the right balance between regulatory and competition outcomes if there were to be more innovation, more effective competition and greater efficiency in the United Kingdom banking industry. He added that, in the Financial Services and Markets Bill, the Government had already taken a significant step forward in tackling the issue, and suggested ways in which it might be taken further.

Don Cruickshank made some specific recommendations. The Financial Services Authority should be responsible for making the trade-off between regulatory and competition outcomes in financial services. To ensure that that happens, the FSA should have a primary competition objective in addition to its regulatory objective. He recommended that the financial services sector should have no unnecessary exclusion from general competition law. The rules should be within the scope of scale or complex monopoly investigations by the Office of Fair Trading or the Competition Commission. The OFT should not be required legally to scrutinise every rule issued by the FSA, but its role of overseeing the financial services sector, including the impact of regulation, should be strengthened. The FSA's rule-making decisions should be open to review in respect of their impact on competition. The final recommendation was that the Competition Commission, not Ministers, should be the final arbiters of the public interest in the scrutiny or review procedures.

The Government considered the interim report very carefully and announced their response on 9 November. We accepted all but one of Don Cruickshank's recommendations, and we shall table amendments to the Financial Services and Markets Bill to give effect to them in due course. In the remaining area, although we share Don Cruickshank's objective that the FSA should have responsibility for making a trade-off between

regulatory outcomes, we did not accept his conclusion that giving it a new competition objective would assist it in doing so. Instead, we believed it likely that such a change would confuse the responsibilities of the FSA, as the United Kingdom's prudential financial services regulator, and the roles of the OFT and the Competition Commission, which are responsible for competition regulation in the economy as a whole. We are considering the changes to the Bill that will be necessary to meet the underlying recommendations of Don Cruickshank's review.

In summary, the Government took Don Cruickshank's interim report very seriously. Our response demonstrated our commitment to effective competition in the banking sector. Don Cruickshank said in a statement at the time:

"I welcome the changes the Government proposes to make to the Bill to ensure that markets in financial services are subject to effective competition scrutiny."

I understand that the review team is close to finalising its report, and the Government should receive it in the next couple of months. The hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) mentioned June.

Mr. Flight: By June.

Miss Johnson: I think that that is a generous estimate.

I should like to deal with some of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford. He referred to the difficulties that some of his constituents have had with the banking sector, and we all sympathise with those problems. That is why the ombudsman proposals are in the Financial Services and Markets Bill and why matters are being dealt with under the FSA's supervision. We need those structures, and we are putting them in place. We recognise that there are issues to be addressed.

My hon. Friend also spoke of the details of the financial services ombudsman scheme as proposed in the Bill. I am grateful for his comments and questions. I understand why some hon. Members have attempted to turn this debate into a detailed discussion of the Bill. They will have further opportunities to do so shortly, but now is not the time. There have already been plenty of opportunities. However, the specific areas mentioned by my hon. Friend are relevant to this debate.

The first recourse for those who have a dispute with a bank or other financial institution is to try and resolve the dispute directly. My hon. Friend described some of the difficulties that occasionally arise when doing so. The banking code emphasises the need for fair dealing, transparency on charges and a willingness to correct errors and handle complaints speedily. The industry has shown a willingness to update the code regularly and to take account of the views of a range of outside bodies, including the current relevant ombudsmen.

I recognise that it is not always possible to resolve disputes directly; that is why the schemes exist and why, as my hon. Friend is aware, the Financial Services and Markets Bill covers that important issue. Part XV sets out the framework for the operation of the ombudsman scheme, the detailed operation of which will be determined in rules made by the Financial Services Authority. This scheme will replace the existing dispute resolution schemes, including the existing banking ombudsman. It will provide a one-stop shop, which is extremely desirable. The scheme's main purpose is to provide easy access for individual retail consumers to a dispute resolution procedure that is speedy and informal. However, it will be open to the authority to define certain categories of firms as eligible complainants. The FSA is consulting on this; it issued a consultation paper in November last year and is seeking responses by 10 February.

As proposed by the FSA, the scheme would provide a free, simple, informal and accessible alternative to the courts. It would enable eligible customers of the banks to resolve a range of disputes similar to those currently covered. It would, of course, also be statutory and its findings would be binding.

The FSA has proposed that firms should be eligible to use the scheme if they have a turnover of up to £1 million, and no more than four employees. A number of people have commented on the proposals, and my hon. Friend may wish to do so. As for his comments about retrospective compensation, it is worth noting that many of the claims received pre-date the banking code. Some other changes, such as advance notification of charges, have been made since then.

Let me say to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) that we recognise that there is a trend towards smaller branch networks. We welcome the banks' development of alternative delivery channels. Choice and diversity are important; a number of banking options are open for many people, but not everybody. However, there are now many options that were not previously available. Indeed, a number of banks, including Lloyds TSB, have successfully established links with Post Office Counters Ltd. to ensure that banking is available where there is a post office. The post office network is far more extensive than the banking network and provides a number of other options.

I was concerned to hear how events have developed in Reading and about the lack of consultation. That is not how banks should deal with their customers. I was passed a note offering inducements to have a meeting. I shall consider further the possibility of holding such a meeting. The inducement was that my hon. Friend will love me for ever—it says here. I find that quite tempting—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. John McWilliam): Order. On that appropriate note, time is up.

Inner London Housing

12.30 pm

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I welcome the opportunity to hold this brief debate. I also welcome the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), who looks more like a Minister than I have ever known him to do, and I have known him for a long time. I am glad that he will reply to the debate, because, although the housing problems that he faces in his constituency are different from those in inner London, he has a good understanding of the life of people in inner London. I hope, therefore, that he will have some sympathy over the issues that I shall raise.

I have chosen inner London housing as the subject of the debate because the problems there are different from those in the rest of the country. A vacant housing agency has been set up by the Government. Members of Parliament from north-western and north-eastern constituencies frequently complain about the large number of unlettable council properties in their areas—that is a fairly common phenomenon in that region, and raises specific issues that need to be tackled.

However, the situation in inner London is completely different. Every week, my constituency surgery is full of people with desperate housing problems. Those problems impinge on many other parts of people's lives. We must consider that. Recently, a document jointly produced by the London Housing Unit and the Association of London Government set out starkly how poor quality housing affects people's lives.

I shall not quote the whole document, as that would take up the half-hour allocated for the debate, so I shall deal specifically with educational achievement. Teachers in any inner London primary or secondary school will tell us that children living in bed-and-breakfast or hostel accommodation, or grossly overcrowded council accommodation, suffer in many ways. They suffer because they do not have their own bedroom—something that all of us would want for our children—so they cannot do their homework and keep up with other children.

If a child has to share a bedroom with a couple of brothers or sisters, that is extremely unhealthy—especially for older children. Furthermore—on a practical matter—if one child is ill, all the children become ill. In an overcrowded household, the incidence of cross-infection is much higher than elsewhere. If children do not have their own bedroom, where can they do their homework? Homework clubs are fine; they are wonderful, I welcome and support them. However, children should be able to do their homework in their own home and in their own time. That is important.

Truancy rates are higher among children who live in overcrowded accommodation. Often their parents are much poorer. Increasingly, London is becoming a two-class society. In any primary school, one can see which kids have computers and good housing and who are achieving in school. One can also see children who are equally as bright, enthusiastic and intelligent, but do not have computers at home and do not have the same facilities as others. We owe it to our children to ensure that they have decent housing.

If I might migrate slightly—from the school to the doctor's surgery, or to the local hospital—we can consider the incidence of notifiable diseases and serious health problems, such as bronchial pneumonia. One can often trace those problems straight back to housing. My general practitioner, who works in my constituency, asked me, only half joking, "Why don't we swap surgeries one week, because we're seeing the same people?" Their real problem is not health, but poverty and housing. My GP told me to do my best to improve their housing and he would do his best to improve their health. However, the two matters are closely linked. If one takes into account such matters as the nutrition of people who live in poor quality housing, one can see the whole pattern.

In the attitudes of many of our young people—those in their mid-teens and older youths—towards education and life in general, I detect a sense of anger and dislocation, and a lack of belonging, because they have not had the same opportunities as others. That can often be traced back to inadequate housing. There is no lack of love on the part of their parents, nor a lack of desire to keep the family together. Their main problems are economic and are to do with housing. That is what we must try to tackle.

In inner London overall, there is a serious shortfall of housing.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): Does my hon. Friend agree that that has been especially exacerbated in Tory-controlled Wandsworth? There, the situation is much worse, because the council has sold a large quantity of its social housing stock to people outside the housing waiting list, as part of its continued mad idea that such housing is not needed. Does he agree that it is important for the Government to be able to haul in Wandsworth council to try to stop that process, given the inner London housing crisis that he so eloquently describes?

Mr. Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which he made at just the right time; I was about to refer to the sale of council properties.

Last Sunday, on "Crosstalk", I debated poverty in London with the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman). She held up Westminster and Wandsworth as paragons of virtue. I pointed out that both those authorities, where a significant number of extremely poor people live in substandard accommodation, had been involved not only in the legal sale of council housing, which local authorities are forced to undertake under the right to buy legislation, but had engaged in the wholesale removal from the social register of council tenants and council properties, and had exported their homeless people to other far-flung boroughs. That issue must be examined.

I entirely accept my hon. Friend's suggestion. I hope that the Minister will ask those two authorities—especially Wandsworth—what they are doing by continuing that policy of disposing of empty publicly owned buildings. There is a big difference between that and the sale of housing to existing tenants under the right to buy.

The Housing Corporation, which funds the construction of buildings by housing associations, has constantly had its funding cut. That has not occurred

only under the Labour Government; it is part of a long continuum whereby the corporation's capital allocation has been reduced and it must rely increasingly on the private sector for funding. That leads to a disparity between the rents in housing association and local authority properties. That is a serious matter.

If a tenant receives housing benefit, the rent disparity does not make much difference. However, when tenants are trying to find a job, it makes an enormous difference. If they find a job and live in a housing association property with a lower rent than a council property, the gap between being on benefit and working is more favourable than it would be if their property had a high rent—a positive disincentive is created. That matter must be considered.

The total number in the queue for affordable housing in London is about 178,000—an enormous figure. In my own borough, the number is 12,000, of whom several hundred are on the priority list at any one time. That figure masks many inequities and inequalities. To get on to the housing waiting list, it is not just a matter of going to the town hall, the council office or—in my borough—the neighbourhood office and putting oneself on the list. People are included on the list only if they are in significant housing need and if they are not single. Single people, who have no particular medical problems and no requirement to support anyone else, do not go on to the housing list. The number of people in housing need is thus much higher than that figure of 178,000.

When my hon. Friend the Minister examines housing statistics, as he obviously does, will he reconsider the problems that are faced by single people? I give hon. Members an example. A week ago, a single man visited my advice surgery; he explained, reasonably, his housing problems and said that he was trying to find a job. He is due to attend various interviews, so hopefully he will be successful. However, he cannot find anywhere to live because he cannot afford any privately rented accommodation locally. He would be eligible for housing benefit if he could find private accommodation, but he cannot raise the deposit. He is being asked for deposits of more than £1,000 to rent a small flat in the borough of Islington; there is no way that he can raise that.

Either we must consider introducing rent controls in the private sector or we must look at the role of the Department of Social Security in helping to support people in raising a deposit for a privately rented flat. Many single people simply cannot raise the large amount needed for a deposit, and therefore cannot move into a privately rented flat. Meanwhile, landlords increasingly say that they are not interested in people who are on benefit. It is a vicious circle that must be looked at.

Rented accommodation is only part of the issue. Home ownership in London also features in the equation. In the great scheme of things, London certainly has a much higher proportion of council-owned or housing association-owned property than does the south-east as a whole, or, probably, most of the country outside the great industrial cities of the midlands and the north, but house prices are very high. People who own property in London are seen to be on a ladder to permanent wealth, and permanent growth in that wealth.

However, in the borough that I represent, which is not very different from the rest of inner London, prices are rising very rapidly. In my borough, it would cost about £150,000—sometimes as much as £200,000—to buy a one-bedroom flat for single person or a couple.

The cheapest flat that I have seen on sale anywhere in my borough recently was £80,000. Out of curiosity, I went to look at it. It had one bedroom, a living room-kitchen-diner in one room and a very small bathroom, and was on the second floor of a four-storey Victorian building on Holloway road, above a shop. Holloway road is a major road, by any stretch of the imagination. The flat had been well cared for by the current owner, but it was still priced at more than £80,000—for a very small flat where no one could think of bringing up children in a normal way.

The long-term effect of the very rapidly rising prices in inner London is that if a family in housing need cannot get on to the housing list and therefore cannot be nominated to a housing association property or a council property, they must rent privately—for which they need to raise a large deposit and in which they have no long-term guarantee of tenure—or buy, or move out of the borough.

Throughout inner London—Islington, Hackney, Camden, Lambeth and Lewisham—we are witnessing a rapid migration out of people on average or below average income and a rapid migration in of desperately homeless people who are housed in bed-and-breakfast accommodation and often wait a very long time to get any housing, and of wealthier people. London will rue the day that it turned its back on the social housing needs of its people, because we shall end up with an extremely polarised city.

I hope that the Minister will acknowledge several factors. I have mentioned the problems of housing and inadequate housing, but many people are completely homeless. Some of them sleep on the streets and rely on hostels for a secure roof over their head for as many nights as possible, and some are trying to bring up children in bed-and-breakfast accommodation, which is even worse than bringing them up in substandard housing.

We must look for solutions. In the 1970s and early 1980s, I was a local councillor on Haringey council. I recall with great pride the year that our borough managed to provide 1,000 new dwellings. We were very proud of our achievement. Many of those dwellings were of high quality. We were trying to build homes with gardens—places that any of us would want to live in.

After the election of the Conservative Government in 1979, the provision of new dwellings dwindled to almost nothing as a result of the cutting off of funds with which local authorities could build, the denial of local authorities' right to borrow in order to build, the encouragement of a limited number of housing association developments and, increasingly, the private funding of housing associations. Indeed, in answer to a parliamentary question that I asked last year, the Minister for Local Government and the Regions told me that, in one year, the total number of new dwellings for social renting in my borough was only 205. We need far more, as does every other inner London borough.

[Mr. Corbyn]

For solutions, I refer the Minister to a valuable document called "Homelessness in London—a way out" produced jointly by the London Housing Unit and the Association of London Government. Under the heading "Immediate action", it calls for:

"The acquisition—over a three-year period—of 15,000 existing homes, at an estimated total cost of £497m a year. The total public sector grant would be around £1.2b over a three year period, of which 10 per cent. would be met by the boroughs, £50m from the discretionary element of current ADP and the remainder . . . from additional ADP."

The rest would have to be raised from other sources.

The document also calls for

"A further increase to the current cost limits for 'existing satisfactory property' and 'purchase and repair' categories.

An increase to the notional weighting given to the new homelessness indicator in the housing capital resource allocation formula.

The provision of central Government revenue support for net costs of homelessness falling to the General Fund."

The document then talks about

"new measures to be taken in the medium term to prevent homelessness occurring; such as improvements to the housing benefit system, boosting the housing advice service, improving standards in the private rented sector."

Essentially, my plea to the Minister is that unless there is a significant increase in public sector investment in good-quality housing in inner London, the situation will not even mark time; it will get worse. Since the Government were elected, in May 1997, we have welcomed the release of capital receipts, the considerable amount that is being spent on the enormous backlog of housing repair, and the improvements to estates. In my borough, there is a repair backlog of £500 million. The repairs cannot all be done in one year; we are doing our best to deal with them. I hope that the declaration of a single regeneration budget area around Finsbury Park will further increase expenditure on housing.

However, better running, better administration and better improvement to existing stock do not solve the problem. The fact that the Government quite often insist on mixed developments and allow large amounts of private sector developments on land that was formerly in the public sector does nothing to fulfil the needs of the worst-off people in our society. I ask the Minister to consider very seriously increasing capital investment for local authority and housing association properties in inner London.

I mentioned housing benefit a couple of times, because it is important in many people's lives. In the early 1980s, housing benefit was given to local authorities to administer. They did not want to administer it, and indeed are penalised for doing so. In my borough, the administration has now been contracted out to a company called IT Net, largely because the council—in common with Hackney and many other boroughs—could not afford the capital necessary to invest in a new computer system.

The administration of housing benefit is appalling by any standards. Serious grief is caused. People visit me who are in desperate straits, threatened with eviction by private sector landlords because they are in arrears with their rent because housing benefit has not been paid. Others are being threatened by eviction by the local authority for being in arrears, when they are not really in arrears; it is an administrative problem.

I hope that, in monitoring the performance of the administration of housing benefit throughout the country—obviously, in the context of the debate, including London—the Minister will take note of those companies that are making a great deal of money from housing benefit but delivering an appalling service. I hope that he will take note of the vast profits that are being made by bed-and-breakfast landlords, who are getting fat on housing benefit while providing appalling housing. We need to take a serious look at the housing benefit system and perhaps invest more in bricks and mortar than in private sector landlords.

We ended the 20th century with great bangs, great fireworks and great hopes for this century. I hoped that we would have a slightly more social objective towards the start of this century. It cannot be right that, in inner London, the divisions between rich and poor are so big, and getting bigger. It cannot be right that so many children are growing up in inadequate accommodation. It cannot be right that market forces are driving the poor out of inner London and forcing the remainder to live in substandard private rented accommodation.

We must make a real effort to improve the housing conditions of the poorest people in this city. That problem can best be tackled in the way that it was tackled in the 19th century by great social reformers, such as Annie Besant, and by the London county council and many local authorities in the great building boom after the second world war. They built property for affordable rent, to give secure homes to people who would otherwise be denied them. If we deny our young people decent quality housing, we shall deny them many other things in life. I look to my hon. Friend the Minister and the Government to recognise those needs and to provide us with the investment that we need to improve housing conditions in inner London.

12.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Chris Mullin): In his forceful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) has raised many important issues. However, he has left me only nine minutes in which to respond to his many questions.

Mr. Corbyn: I beg my hon. Friend's pardon.

Mr. Mullin: At the outset, I shall address one or two of the points that my hon. Friend made. However, I may have to write to him to reply to his other questions.

My hon. Friend is right. Before I moved to Sunderland in 1985, I lived in inner London for many years. I am familiar at first hand with some of the problems that he described.

My hon. Friend mentioned the special difficulties that single people have in getting on to housing waiting lists. He is right to say that it is a serious problem, but I am aware of several schemes to deal with it. The Peabody Trust has a scheme in Hackney to help single people into housing and the Bart's and Royal London trust has a similar scheme for its employees. Those schemes are

aimed primarily at finding key workers somewhere reasonable to live, but we would like to see more of them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) mentioned the position in Wandsworth and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North referred to Wandsworth and Westminster where local authorities have taken the irresponsible line of selling social housing stock and pushing the problems that they should deal with into neighbouring boroughs. That is regrettable and my officials are in an on-going dialogue with Wandsworth on that and other issues.

My hon. Friend mentioned resources. It is quite right that resources lie at the root of dealing with the huge problems that we face. However, I am sure that he accepts that it is not just a question of resources. He and I have lived in inner London for long periods and will have noticed the extraordinary incompetence and inefficiency that has occurred in some London boroughs over the years. I am glad to say that the position is getting better. We are putting much pressure on local authorities to improve their performance, and many of them have. I launched the best value housing programme this morning. I hope that it will also provide an incentive for local authorities to improve their performance. I am well aware, as my hon. Friend will be, that one can pour good money after bad. Therefore, we want the many extra resources that we are making available to be spent properly.

My hon. Friend referred to the homeless. As he will know, we are putting £200 million into a programme to help with rough sleeping. Given the constituency that he represents, I am sure that the extra pressure that asylum seekers put on housing is on his mind. He will know that we are taking steps to move asylum seekers to those parts of the country where there is no shortage of accommodation. Sunderland, the area that I represent, is for the first time accommodating asylum seekers in some of our surplus houses.

My hon. Friend referred to the Association of London Government document. My hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning has already met representatives of the association to discuss its initiative and he is due to meet them again next month.

Let me make it clear from the outset that the Government are acutely aware of the difficulties that my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North has described. We are determined to do everything that we can to meet the challenge. Our aim is to ensure that everyone has a decent roof over his head and lives in sustainable communities.

The present situation in inner London is the result of several complex factors that cannot be resolved overnight. In the same way, we believe that the solution lies not in one or two high-profile central Government initiatives. A more holistic approach is called for that involves a number of linked activities in a partnership of the private, public and voluntary sectors.

The Government have already taken significant steps to improve the quality and increase the supply of affordable housing in the capital. We are involved in a massive investment programme to raise the quality and quantity of social housing in London. Over the lifetime of this Parliament, an additional £5 billion of capital receipts will have been made available nationally to build new homes and to rehabilitate old ones. About a third of that money will go to London, reflecting the high level of need that we know exists in the capital.

As part of that support, we recently announced a £613 million package of capital resources for investment by London boroughs in the current financial year. That represents a 54 per cent. increase over the previous year and accords with spending plans arising from the comprehensive spending review. Of this, more than £400 million will go to inner London authorities. Although some authorities will want to use the money for repairs to their own stock, others will want to prioritise new supply initiatives to ease the pressures on homelessness and families in temporary accommodation.

As I said, we are keen to ensure that the extra resources are spent wisely. For that reason, the housing investment programme allocations are made not on the basis of need alone, but on the quality of authorities' housing strategies and their performance in delivering housing services. That has proved a great incentive for the London boroughs to make real efforts to improve the services that they provide to their tenants and residents. I was pleased to see that, for example, my hon. Friend's local authority, Islington, made significant progress last year and that is to some extent reflected in its award of £28.5 million for the current financial year—an increase of more than 57 per cent. on what it received previously.

Most housing authorities in London are gradually improving their standards of performance, but there are still areas where some could do better. Indeed, some local authorities—I could name them but I will not—have only recently worked out which houses they own and which they do not. We are determined that local authorities should deliver high quality, efficient services that are responsive to the needs and aspirations of local people. That is why we are introducing the best value framework that I mentioned earlier. It will start on 1 April. Housing, as one of the key local authority services, is of prime importance. The new housing inspectorate, which is part of the Audit Commission, will not only act as an independent scrutineer of local authority housing services, but will assist and support authorities to build long-term strategies and tackle service failure where it occurs.

The proposed single pot for housing, also due to be implemented next year, will give London boroughs greater flexibility on deciding their own spending priorities. It will be up to each borough to decide on the balance between investing in its own stock and in new supply. I am confident that the boroughs will take full advantage of the opportunity.

The comprehensive spending review confirmed the continuation of the Housing Corporation's development programme. We have reversed the decline in funding and it will now increase in line with inflation. In the next financial year, we shall invest £276 million in London.

London's supply of land is limited, leading to an imbalance between supply and demand, so one of our main themes is to make more efficient use of existing urban land. The publication of the report of the urban task force has given greater impetus to making urban

[Mr. Mullin]

areas in inner London and elsewhere more attractive places to live. Over time, that will help to relieve the pressures on the capital's housing stock.

We must not underestimate the contribution that the planning system makes to the supply of affordable homes in London. That is why the Government give strong encouragement to local authorities to use existing planning powers to insist that developers provide affordable housing in new developments. London boroughs reported that 2,650 homes were secured through planning policy in 1998–99 and many more are in the pipeline. Taken together with more than £15 million of developer contributions in lieu of on-site provision, the planning system makes a real contribution to increasing the supply of affordable housing. My colleagues and I are keen to encourage good practice and I am confident that the planning system could be used to better effect to deliver even more affordable homes.

As I made clear at the outset, I did not have sufficient time to respond to all the points in my hon. Friend's speech. I shall study it and, if there are points that I have not answered, I shall write to him. I thank him for raising this important issue.

Airborne Forces (Pegasus Symbol)

1 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I am delighted to have secured the opportunity to raise the issue of the Pegasus symbol and airborne forces in this short debate. I am particularly grateful for the presence of the entire Conservative Front-Bench shadow defence team. Another Conservative Member who would very much have liked to be here is my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), who has taken a close interest in this matter, but who is unavoidably on a Select Committee visit to the Netherlands. My hon. Friend has, however, left me a copy of a publication which is one of his prized possessions. It is a venerable, official history of British airborne divisions, entitled "By Air to Battle". Typically, because the Pegasus symbol is directly identified with anything to do with the airborne forces, that symbol adorns the front cover of the publication.

My hon. Friend particularly drew my attention to the part of the publication that refers to members of the airborne forces being honoured in December 1944 at a special investiture held in Buckingham palace. It says:

> "Each officer and man of these . . . divisions wears upon his shoulder the badge of Pegasus, the winged horse and its rider, brandishing a lance. As an emblem it is singularly appropriate, and whenever the citizens of Britain catch sight of it, they may perhaps call to mind that other horse which, long ago, it is said, brought armed men into the city of Troy—the vanguard of a victorious army."

To have an entire debate about insignia might seem to exaggerate the importance of such symbolism, but, when we consider it in contexts other than the military, we know that that is not the case. Only today, the papers are full of the argument about the future of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and no doubt part of that will be the question of what signs, badges and insignia will in future represent that police force.

When one looks at any publication dealing with events in the history of the airborne forces, such as the account of the battle of Arnhem in Martin Middlebrook's definitive version that I have here, it is always Pegasus that illustrates its cover because Pegasus is the brand name that is inextricably bound up in the public mind with the image, the record and the heroism of the airborne forces. It is astonishing that the symbol should have been scrapped when it is so well known.

I am concerned about that matter because I view it not in isolation, but as part of a continuum. I have been noting with dismay a succession of events that have been chipping away at service morale and the military ethos. As I customarily do in these debates, I have taken the trouble to tell the Minister in advance nearly all the points that I intend to make today.

The Minister knows of my concern that, all too often, senior serving military personnel are being pushed forward by politicians into debates, to take the flak and to justify and try to excuse controversial decisions made by politicians. That is not good for the forces; it is not good for the impartiality of serving personnel, and it is imposing too much on military chiefs who have to put on a brave face when confronted by unpalatable decisions.

Politicians have a habit of showing spite to those who embarrass them. That is as true of the military field as it is anywhere else. I am old enough to remember the case of Colonel Colin Mitchell of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who was deployed in Aden in the 1960s, when Harold Wilson had announced that it was not possible or viable to continue to maintain British control there.

Colonel Mitchell, on his own initiative, showed by his successful activities in Crater and the Radfan mountains that it was entirely practicable to do so. I believed then, as I do now, that it was no coincidence that, within a very few years, a Labour Government were hell-bent on destroying his regiment, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

I shall touch briefly on other examples before I return to Pegasus itself. The first is the Berlin airlift, which was commemorated in a number of ways in this country. However, unlike in other countries, no commemorative stamps were issued here last year to mark the 50th anniversary of that successful key moment in the cold war. I have a particular interest because my constituent, Mrs. Jessamy Waite, is the widow of Air Commodore Rex Waite, the RAF officer who conceived the practicability of the Berlin airlift.

On 6 April 1998, in a parliamentary question, I asked:

"Will the Minister consider the representations of the British Berlin Airlift Association, which wants the Royal Mail to issue a commemorative stamp to mark that crucial turning point in the war? That suggestion has so far been given a idle brush-off."

The Minister for the Armed Forces was then merely the Under-Secretary. He replied with his usual insouciance:

"I cannot accept that. I have had discussions with the Department of Trade and Industry, which as the sponsoring Department, is discussing this matter with the Post Office."—[*Official Report*, 6 April 1998; Vol. 310, c. 13-14.]

Sadly, those discussions were unavailing and no stamp appeared.

Subsequently, when I was in Germany, I saw the German postal 50-year anniversary cover of what they call the Luftbrücke, the aerial bridge. That followed the stamp that Germany had issued for the 40th anniversary, which followed a stamp to commemorate the 25th anniversary. It is sad that the Germans have a better appreciation of what the RAF did than does the British Post Office, whatever representations the Ministry of Defence managed to make to it.

The second example is the changing-over of the long-term volunteer reserve decorations, known as the RD and the TD. In March 1999, those gave way to a combined long service decoration for reserve forces, which is applicable to all ranks. As someone who never got above the lower deck in the Royal Naval Reserve, I welcome that change.

I do not, however, welcome the fact that, whereas previously officers had the incentive to stay on and work hard for 10 years to put the letters RD and TD after their name, that incentive has now disappeared. Instead of entitling officers and other ranks to have those letters after their name, the change ensures that nobody now has those letters after their name, except those who were awarded the decoration before the end of March 1999.

The next example is the royal tournament. Almost by stealth, and certainly without any major public debate, more than 100 years of history were scrapped virtually without notice. The first that most people knew about the loss of the tournament was that it was a fait accompli. When one looked at the royal tournament website, one read the following announcement:

"The Royal Tournament will run from 20th July to 2nd August 1999. It will be a show that will live on in your memory, make its mark in history and make you proud of our heritage. This is the year you must not miss. You will not see its like again."

You can say that again.

What did the MOD have to say about that? Mr. George Robertson, who was then Secretary of State, issued a press release in which he said that

"it is timely for us to take a fresh look at this event . . . A number of alternatives are under consideration for this tri-service contribution to the year 2000"—

he was referring to the tournament's successor. He continued:

"A study team is currently examining how to modernise the permanent annual tournament after this millennium spectacular has completed."

That press release makes it quite obvious that the Government had no clear idea of what they wanted to put in place of the royal tournament; all they knew was that they wanted to get rid of an established and historic institution.

I revert now to the question of Pegasus and the airborne forces. In the early hours—at about a quarter past midnight—on the night of 5–6 June 1944, three gliders landed at the foot of a bridge over the Caen canal. In one of those gliders was a friend of mine, Mr. Bill Jolliffe, who was then a sergeant-major. He was a quiet, unassuming man, whom I met on what turned out to be his last trip to visit the grave in Normandy of his brother, who had been killed 10 days into the battle. Bill is not able to tell us what he thinks of the abolition of the Pegasus symbol, but one of my constituents, Mr. Bill Cornick, who is now 82, was in the second wave of gliders that landed during D-day itself. He has written to me, saying:

"How can those who have not served understand the morale-boosting effect the right to wear such insignia has upon soldiers? Arguably this is the driving force which makes men rise to efforts seemingly impossible, like all those things which go to make the individual think that his unit is the best. It's part of man management."

That is the voice of a veteran, but what do ordinary serving soldiers think about the loss of the insignia? I offer a couple of quotations from the comments of serving soldiers that were published in a service magazine. I shall identify neither the soldiers nor the magazine, in case Alastair Campbell gets to work on them. One states:

"I think it is disgraceful. I would be upset if the REME"—

the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, of which he is a member—

"got amalgamated, which is one of the worst things, but to have something your parents and grandparents earned taken away must be heartbreaking. People died for that badge."

Another says:

"Each unit needs an identity so I feel they should keep it. It gives them a sense of the past and the endeavours of those who went before them. There are too many changes going on around the Army."

[Dr. Julian Lewis]

A third says:

"I don't think they should scrap the Pegasus; perhaps the whole air mobile force should keep it as their emblem. I don't know if the Paras would like that, but it is one way to keep it. It would keep everyone happy, I think."

He is absolutely right—that would be the sensible solution.

In August, I wrote to the Minister about the issue. The second paragraph of his reply of 1 September appeared to be contradicted by the fourth. The second paragraph states:

"The emblem of Bellerophon astride Pegasus was introduced in 1941 for all elements of the Airborne Forces"—

I emphasise, all elements—

"which during World War II included the Parachute Regiment, the Glider Pilot Regiment"—

we know that from my account of the glider attack on the bridge that later become known as Pegasus bridge—

"the SAS, and all within the WW II Army Air Corps."

However, the fourth paragraph states:

"The reason why this emblem has not been incorporated into the new 16 Air Assault Brigade badge is that the parachute element of this new Brigade is only one of the two constituent parts—the other being the aviation or airmobile element".

That argument is undermined by the second paragraph, which states that the symbol has, in the past, been used far more widely than just by the Parachute regiment.

The change in insignia, like the scrapping of the royal tournament before Ministers had any idea of what would be put in its place, is rooted in a word that we hear all too often from new Labour—modernisation. New Labour means Labour without socialism and modernisation in the armed forces means the armed forces without their history. The problem is that the Government have no sense of history, no sense of military morale and, apparently, no sense of the value of the Pegasus symbol as a brand synonymous in the public mind with the concept of airborne forces.

I conclude by referring to one of my frequent visits to Arnhem—I have friends who live close by—made in September of last year, the 55th anniversary of the battle. I have here three photographs taken during that visit. The first shows the sign erected over the road leading toward Oosterbeek cemetery: it says, in Dutch and in English, "Welcome veterans", and silhouetted against the sky line is Pegasus, selected from all the signs that might have been chosen. The second photograph is that of a veteran in a period Land Rover: he is wearing his red beret and his Parachute regiment badge—the Minister will, no doubt, assure us that those are not to disappear; yet his tie is covered with the symbol of Pegasus.

The final photograph is of two wreaths, side by side on the memorial in the Airborne cemetery in Oosterbeek. One represents the British Legion: the card reads, "Lest we forget". The other represents the airborne forces: at the heart of it is the Pegasus symbol. By their despicable action, the Government and the Ministry of Defence have ensured that it is far more likely that we shall forget what we owe to the airborne forces of the United Kingdom.

1.16 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I am grateful to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) for the opportunity to explain the Army's decision not to incorporate the Pegasus emblem in the new 16 Air Assault Brigade badge; and to explain the Government's position on that issue. I am also grateful to him for having previously told me about some of his broader concerns; I hope to deal with them as well. I believe that he is trying to construct an over-developed edifice on some pretty shaky foundations—it must have something to do with his experience of the Oxford school of philosophy.

It might be helpful to the hon. Gentleman and to the House if I begin by correcting a widely held assumption, expressed by the hon. Gentleman during our lengthy correspondence, that the Bellerophon or Pegasus symbol is the badge of the Parachute Regiment. It is not, and never has been, specific to the Parachute Regiment. The only badge specific to the Parachute Regiment is the regimental cap badge, approved by the sovereign, which depicts a pair of outspread wings with an open parachute in the centre surmounted by the royal crest. That badge was designed to reflect the operational role of the Parachute regiment. It is not the same as the Bellerophon insignia, and it remains the cap badge of the Parachute regiment today.

The popular, and widely recognised, emblem of Bellerophon astride Pegasus was introduced in 1942 for all elements of the airborne forces. During the second world war, they included the Parachute Regiment, the Glider Pilot Regiment and the Special Air Service. Therefore, it was a specific to arm insignia, as the formation flash of the 1st and 6th Airborne Divisions; it was not a regimental badge. In the post-war period, the emblem was used as a formation insignia in airborne formations, including 6 Airborne Division, 16 Parachute Brigade and 44 Parachute Brigade (Volunteers). I reiterate that the Bellerophon design was not specific to the Parachute Regiment, but was used by the formation as a whole to reflect its inclusion of airborne elements.

The Bellerophon badge has, in recent years, been worn as the combat insignia of 5 Airborne Brigade. It was worn by all brigade members, including logistics staff, engineers, signallers and non-parachute-trained infantry battalions. Equally, it has not been worn by parachute battalions when employed outside the 5th Airborne Brigade. However, the Ministry of Defence and I appreciate fully the significant level of attachment that many feel towards the emblem. I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that the decision to discontinue use of the Bellerophon emblem was not taken lightly, or without full and careful consideration of all the facts.

I remind the House that 16 Air Assault Brigade also includes the units of the former 24 Air Mobile Brigade, whose winged emblem, called a heraldic pinion, is also being discontinued. That badge has an equally long and illustrious history, having been used originally as the insignia of 24 Guards Independent Infantry Brigade from 1940 to 1947. It is reputed that this was the personal crest of Brigadier "Boy" Browning, who gave it to the brigade when he was its commander. The emblem has been used variously by several infantry and aviation formations over the intervening years.

The newly formed 16 Air Assault Brigade is one of the most powerful brigade-sized formations in Europe, and the most powerful air-manoeuvrable fighting unit in Britain's history—a history of which we are all justly proud. It is made up of two discrete parts; one is the parachute element, deploying from the air, and the other is the aviation or airmobile element, which will engage in battle from the air. The brigade will comprise 16 different units. In addition to the infantry and Army Air Corps elements, there will be units from the Royal Artillery, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and Royal Logistic Corps, to name but a few.

This exciting new force, with its inherent versatility and flexibility, will dramatically change the way in which we respond to crises throughout the world. The introduction of the Apache helicopter during the year will further enhance the brigade's assault power.

The hon. Gentleman claimed that, somehow, the military was being asked to ratify decisions made by civilians and by Ministers. I stress that there was a recommendation to Ministers from the Army. It is their judgment, given the circumstances that I have described, that the new formation needed its own symbol to reflect its new and unique identity, with which all its members will be able to identify in future. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the badge that has been decided upon for the new 16 Air Assault Brigade is a symbolic design of a striking eagle. However, in keeping with tradition, the new emblem incorporates both light blue for the aviation element and maroon for the airborne heritage.

I understand that many people will regard the passing of 5 Airborne and 24 Air Mobile Brigades, remembering, as well detailed by the hon. Gentleman, their achievements and rich traditions. We have not lost sight of the contribution that they have made to Britain's armed forces. However, the new brigade will reinforce the role that airborne forces play in carrying out our defence mission. I reassure the House that there is no question of the specific and unique identity of the Parachute Regiment or any other regiment being lost as a result of the formation of 16 Air Assault Brigade, or the discontinuance of the Bellerophon emblem. The identity of the regiment will continue to be represented by its winged regimental badge, which is worn on its famous maroon berets. The regimental magazine of the regiment will maintain the link by retaining the Pegasus title.

In addition, the Pegasus trophy will continue to be awarded each year by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales to the unit that is deemed to have done the most to enhance the reputation of the airborne forces. The Pegasus symbol will be retained by a number of organisations, including the airborne forces charities, Friends of Airborne Forces, the airborne forces security fund, Airborne Brotherhood and the Airborne Forces museum.

The hon. Gentleman and the House, including the many Members who have written to the Government on this subject on behalf of their constituents, can be assured that the Pegasus symbol, and all the history and tradition that it represents, will continue to be an instantly recognisable symbol of the airborne forces, both past and present.

The hon. Gentleman raised other items in trying to construct the thesis of disregard for our history. I resent that, because we are alert to the issues and traditions of our armed forces and the important part that they play in maintaining the cohesion and operational effectiveness of our forces.

We made a significant contribution to the celebration of the courage of those who took part in the Berlin airlift and the success of a remarkable operation. The Royal Mail had responsibility for this. It considered the issuing of a commemorative stamp, but decided that it was unable to do so as it was focusing on a millennium theme in 1999. As the hon. Gentleman kindly pointed out, I made significant representations to the Royal Mail and to the Department of Trade and Industry on the matter. As they work on fairly lengthy time scales, the initiating process should probably have taken place under a previous Administration. However, the airlift was commemorated by the production of a commemorative label and a philatelic medallic cover.

Further, Royal Air Force bands participated in the traditional wreath-laying ceremony and at various concerts. The Queen's Colours Squadron and aircraft from squadrons associated with the airlift participated in events and ceremonies marking the 50th anniversary of the start of the airlift.

We had to face the real issue of the level of commitment of manpower by the services to the Royal Tournament and the reduction year on year of attendances, which led to a series of losses. The field-gun competition was the subject of some correspondence from hon. Members. Of the 30,000 man days that were taken up by the tournament, about 16,000 were taken up by the naval field-gun competition. The event had significant audience loyalty, and it continues to be held in special regard by those who participated in it. Frankly, however, it was no longer representative of the Royal Navy and its contemporary activities. In practical terms, it led to considerable pressure on other members of the Royal Navy, who were having to fill gaps created by those who were able to participate in the event.

Dr. Julian Lewis: That beggars belief. Of course the Royal Tournament took up a large proportion of the Navy's resources. However, the field-gun competition was synonymous with the Royal Tournament, just as Pegasus is synonymous with airborne forces. I find it incredible that the Labour party is suggesting that people cannot see the value of these symbolisms.

Mr. Spellar: The reality is that, within the Royal Navy, many individuals were having to be devoted to the event. That was putting pressure on other members of the service when, I reiterate, attendances at the tournament were declining, which led to the making of losses. The purposes of the tournament were to provide a shop window for the armed forces, to enable people to associate with them and to generate money for service charities.

We considered how the situation could be improved, We were mindful of the significant attachment to the tradition represented by the tournament. That is why the Royal military tattoo of 2000 will be the armed forces' flagship contribution to the nation's millennium celebrations, with a theme of defence of the realm past, present and future. It will take place against the spectacular and historic backdrop of Horse Guards in July, with a performance on six evenings. It will combine

[Mr. Spellar]

the most imaginative staging, state-of-the-art technology, pageantry, son et lumière, lasers, fireworks and the world's largest mobile video screen. It will provide a worthy showcase for the men and women who make up Britain's armed forces. [*Interruption.*] I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman finds that amusing.

We will not lose sight of the fact that the armed forces have played a significant and integral part in our history. They continue to play their part on the world stage, and will continue to do so in future. The military tattoo will demonstrate that to the country and to the wider world.

In parallel, an annual defence event will be held during the summer outside London—it is important that we get away from London in many instances—at different locations each year. This will be based, where possible, on a successful single service event to minimise the resource implications, and the services will take it in turn to lead on the event.

I am pleased to say that the first of these events will be held in Portsmouth in 2001, with the Royal Navy in the lead, and will be linked to the popular international festival of the sea. We intend that both the location and the content of these regional events will enable the armed forces to showcase their equipment and demonstrate their capability in an exciting and modern way, including hands-on public participation, which was not possible in the royal tournament.

Our armed forces are steeped in history and tradition, of which they are justifiably proud and which contribute to operational effectiveness and to our sense of identity as a nation. Our armed forces have never stood still, and that is one of their enduring strengths. These matters must continue to be judged on their merits and on the way in which they serve the country and the armed services.

Hadley Wood (Parkway Station)

1.30 pm

Mr. Stephen Twigg (Enfield, Southgate): I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise a major issue of local concern in my constituency, and one that raises questions of wider regional and national importance. I am especially pleased to have this, my first debate, in the new Westminster Hall. I am a member of the Modernisation Committee and a strong supporter of the experiment.

One of the reasons that the Committee proposed the Westminster Hall experiment was to provide increased opportunities for Back-Bench Members and Select Committees to have issues debated. The topic that I bring before the Chamber today is one that I have attempted to bring before the House for some time under the traditional Adjournment debate procedure. This is my second attempt to bring it to Westminster Hall, and I am delighted to have succeeded so speedily.

I am grateful to all those who assisted me in my preparations for today's debate, in particular the Hadley Wood Association, a number of whose members are present for the debate; the Council for the Protection of Rural England; the Railway Development Society; and several of the affected local authorities, most notably Hertfordshire, Hertsmere and Stevenage councils.

Transport is clearly a key policy challenge for our Parliament, Government and country. There is wide support in my constituency for the Government's transport policy objectives—to reduce congestion, to enhance the environment and reduce pollution, to foster a shift to greater use of public transport and to promote greater integration between different modes of transport, including between road and rail.

As part of this policy development, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions published in July 1998 "The Future Strategy for the M25", which takes a strategic look at the future of that road. In that document, DETR states:

> "Among the issues to be addressed . . . will be the scope for . . . park and ride facilities near the motorway".

I recognise, as do my constituents, that parkway stations can play a positive and productive part in transport policy, but that an overall view needs to be taken about proposed locations which considers the benefits as well as the drawbacks, in terms of both transport and the environment. Over the past year, new parkway stations have been opened at Luton airport and, last May, at Horwich in Bolton, and they have brought many benefits to those areas. Parkways can work where the location is appropriate.

Great North Eastern Railway has expressed a wish to create three new parkway stations—one north of London close to the M25, one close to Edinburgh and one in Doncaster.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising such an important matter on behalf of the residents of Hadley Wood. Does he agree that in transport planning, GNER must be sensitive to local residents and local circumstances? In my constituency a new parkway station is planned, which I believe will

bring enormous benefits to villages such as Rossington and Finningley, but it must be integrated into the local transport infrastructure. An area such as Doncaster could benefit tremendously, but GNER must be mindful of other partners to ensure the best outcome for all concerned.

Mr. Twigg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. Later in my speech, I shall deal with a more appropriate location for the proposed parkway north of London. I am well aware of the benefits that can be gained, but also of the great importance of proper public consultation and involvement.

My understanding is that GNER's preferred site for the parkway station north of London is on land immediately adjacent to Hadley Wood. According to GNER, the aim of the new station would be, first, to encourage north London residents to drive out to Hadley Wood, rather than going into central London to pick up their trains, and secondly, to encourage drivers in the area north-east of London and in Kent to drive around the M25 to Hadley Wood, rather than taking the train into central London and going to King's Cross by underground or other forms of public transport.

The proposed site is greenbelt land in the borough of Hertsmere, although most of the affected residents live in the borough of Enfield in my constituency. GNER has not submitted a formal planning application because it is awaiting the outcome of the process of renegotiation of franchises, and has stated that it will not submit such an application until that process is complete.

I am opposed to the siting of a parkway station in Hadley Wood for three main reasons—first, the effect on the green belt; secondly, the impact on the local infrastructure in my constituency; and thirdly, the wider consequences for transport policy in outer north London and Hertfordshire.

The green belt was one of the finest achievements of the post-war Labour Government. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has reaffirmed the Government's commitment to the green belt. Hadley Wood is an attractive residential area in the north-west of my Enfield, Southgate constituency. The threat to the green belt is a threat to the amenity and way of life not only of the residents of Hadley Wood, but of all my constituents and the residents of neighbouring constituencies. I am pleased to see my colleague the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) in the Chamber. We have been working closely together on the matter, along with the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), in whose constituency the proposed development would take place.

I pay tribute to the excellent work done by the Hadley Wood Association in drawing the attention of local people to the matter and getting media coverage, and in doing work that has largely informed what I shall say in objection to the proposal.

The site is in the narrowest part of the green belt around London. It is less than two miles wide. The effect of a parkway station would be to extend the urbanised boundary of London beyond Potters Bar. The area is a community forest with two working farms, both of which would have to be closed, were the proposal to proceed. They would be replaced by a 2,000-space car park. In other words, two farms would be replaced by an area the size of five Wembley football pitches for cars. That poses a disastrous threat to the green belt.

With regard to the local infrastructure, one effect of the GNER proposal would be to increase the use of roads in our area—the M25, obviously, and local roads as well. The stretch of the M25 between exits 23 and 25 is already heavily overloaded and is a well known bottleneck. It makes little sense to encourage more cars on to an already overloaded stretch of the M25.

Furthermore, like most of London and many other parts of the country, my constituency is increasingly plagued by traffic congestion. Since the opening of exit 24 on the M25, the A111 that passes through my constituency has undergone a heavy increase in traffic. The Hadley Wood Association commissioned a study by the leading traffic consultants, Messrs Colin Buchanan and Partners, in 1997, which demonstrated that during rush hour periods there were more than 1,000 vehicles per hour using that stretch of road. I am certain that there has been a further significant increase in traffic volume since that study was carried out. Buchanan and Partners estimated that a parkway station could add a further 500 cars per hour during peak times.

While one theoretical solution is to widen the roads, there would be substantial local opposition to that as there is little scope or capacity in the Cockfosters area for widening the road. Even were such a plan acceptable, it would be not be viable. In terms of the infrastructure in Cockfosters, Hadley Wood and the wider Enfield, Southgate area, the consequences of such a proposal would be to increase congestion and worsen the bottlenecks. That would contravene the wider objectives of Government policy on transport.

There is a wider argument against the proposal. I am worried about Railtrack's lack of overall planning to develop a coherent strategy for new parkway stations in our part of the country. The case against Hadley Wood is not simply a "not in my back yard" reaction to a proposal to build on the green belt; there is a strong transport argument against it. Hertfordshire county council has clear, well-thought-out transport policies in which Stevenage is the key rail centre for the county. In the past few days, Hertfordshire county council told me that it had received no evidence from GNER or anyone else of special circumstances that would justify building on the green belt. That view is reinforced by Hertsmere borough council, which stated that

"no case has been made"

for the development. Last year, GNER tried to challenge Hertsmere's local plan to facilitate a possible parkway station, but it did not pursue the matter and the local plan stands.

Stevenage council shares Hertfordshire's view that Stevenage should remain the main focus for rail in the county. It goes further, and would like Stevenage to be the site of a parkway station. My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) shares that view. The council told me that there was space in Stevenage to build the necessary car parking facilities, that there is scope to expand the station to six platforms, that no greenbelt issues affect it and that traffic congestion is less significant because of Stevenage's

[Mr. Twigg]

location as a relatively new town alongside the A1M. People in Stevenage and elsewhere in Hertfordshire are worried that a Hadley Wood parkway station would detract from Stevenage's position as the main rail focus for the county. Anxiety has been expressed that some trains might not stop at Stevenage because of the close proximity of the two centres.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will tackle those anxieties in his response. I appreciate that, for the reasons that I outlined, there are no specific proposals from GNER. However, if GNER wins the franchise, it will want to move rapidly to effect its proposals for the three parkway stations, including Hadley Wood. That is why there is widespread anxiety in my constituency and beyond. While the residents of Hadley Wood form the focus of that anxiety, other people in the Enfield, Southgate area and colleagues in neighbouring constituencies are worried about the proposals.

Like my hon. Friend, I am a passionate supporter of public transport and a non-driver. I use public transport every day; I believe in the railways and I support a successful, thriving railway system for our country. There is a persuasive case for a parkway station north of London. However, Hadley Wood is a totally unsuitable location for it. If such a proposal were implemented, it would be a disaster for the green belt, exacerbate already appalling conditions and congestion on our local roads and threaten the future of Stevenage as a rail centre.

I hope that GNER or whoever wins the franchise will abandon the idea of a parkway station in Hadley Wood and pursue the sort of alternatives that I have outlined. I hope that the Minister will take account of my comments and offer some hope to my constituents.

1.44 pm

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I shall speak briefly to support everything that the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) said in opposition to the GNER proposal. I want to make two points on behalf of my constituents. First, if the proposal goes ahead, it will constitute the most devastating blow to the metropolitan green belt in one of its most sensitive areas. The main objective in that area is to keep Potters Bar away from the metropolis. The thin strip of land has already been divided by the M25, so not only the proposed development but the attendant feeder roads would devastate the green belt in that area. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman not only on securing the debate but on the eloquence with which he put the case.

Perhaps I should declare a possible interest. For many years, I was president of the London Green Belt Council until I was appointed a Minister, when, quite properly, I had to give up that honorary position. The consolation for my friends is that my career has gone downwards ever since.

I want to underline the effect of the proposal on the local infrastructure. The roads are already overcrowded and the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate was right to refer to the overloading of the M25 in that area. I disagree with one point that he made. He painted a rather rosy picture of the Government's commitment to conserving our green belt. He mentioned Stevenage, which is a much better location for the proposed parkway station, but the Government have permitted a significant development to the west of Stevenage on the metropolitan green belt. Their action reinforces the case for a parkway station in Stevenage, not Hadley Wood.

1.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I begin, as is usual, by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on securing the debate. I am aware that the proposal by GNER for a new parkway station near the M25 north of London is a source of great concern to many of his constituents.

Since his general election triumph in 1997, my hon. Friend is proving himself, in this matter as in so many others, an extremely conscientious constituency Member of Parliament and an outstanding advocate on behalf of the interests of his constituents.

I also thank the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) for his contribution to the debate. As a former resident of Chipping Barnet, who often walked in Hadley Wood, I know that he is also a most assiduous constituency Member of Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) is another highly effective constituency Member of Parliament. She also made proper representations on behalf of her constituents.

I want to make it perfectly clear at the outset that there is no firm proposal for a new parkway station near Hadley Wood and no final site has been identified. The station is one of three new parkway stations proposed as part of GNER's initial bid for a replacement franchise. The other proposed stations are near Edinburgh and the M18 in South Yorkshire.

However, it is still early days. No decision on whether to replace GNER's franchise has been taken. Even if GNER's bid were successful, careful consideration would need to be given to several important issues including planning, transport and wider environmental implications, before the parkway stations could be approved.

The Chamber knows that last September, the Deputy Prime Minister issued new instructions and guidance to the franchising director asking him to deliver improvements through renegotiation of the terms of franchise agreements. When considering any renegotiation requests, we have asked the franchising director to give due weight to commitments to current performance, customer services, innovation, investment and efficiency; new or earlier investment; securing better performance; initiatives to promote integrated transport; a willingness to give passengers a greater voice in the level and standard of services; and value for the taxpayer.

In November last year, the franchising director announced that the current GNER franchise would be one of the first three to be renegotiated or replaced. The GNER, Connex SouthCentral and Chiltern franchises were chosen because they are thought to offer great potential for improvements and developments which can be delivered in a relatively short time scale.

On 22 December, the franchising director announced that Sea Containers, which is the parent company of GNER and Virgin Rail, in conjunction with

Stagecoach, had pre-qualified to participate in further discussion of its franchise replacement proposals. They are now preparing their detailed proposals for discussion with the franchising director before final negotiations. It is hoped to conclude these negotiations in the spring.

However, it is important to remember that the franchising director is not committed to accepting either proposal. After careful consideration, he may decide instead to allow the existing GNER franchise to run its course until it expires in April 2003.

In considering any franchise replacement negotiations, the franchising director will consult, among others, local authorities, regional planning bodies, regional development agencies and rail users' consultative committees as appropriate. If the parkway station proposal were to be adopted as part of a franchise commitment, planning permission and full local consultation would be required.

I want to say a word about the Government's approach to parkway stations. We are keen to encourage integrated transport proposals that are designed to encourage people to travel by public transport and to reduce the need to travel by car. I understand that GNER's proposal is intended to encourage a modal shift from car and air travel to rail use and to allow a seamless transfer between transport modes. It believes that its proposed parkway stations would considerably reduce long-distance car usage, thereby reducing road and motorway congestion and associated pollution problems.

We are also keen to improve the quality of rail services and GNER believes that the parkway stations would make long-distance rail travel more accessible and attractive. The parkway stations would be served by GNER's planned new fleet of high-speed trains. I understand that stations would be airport style in design and built to accommodate the needs of passengers, including those with special needs. There is a measure of support for a new parkway station in the north London area and the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, for example, believes that the parkway station

"could prove the single most important lever for achieving a modal shift from road to rail for long distance journeys between London and the north east and Scotland."

There are also clearly important planning implications for the scheme, however, and I am well aware that the proposed site for the parkway station lies within the metropolitan green belt. That has generated considerable local opposition and I know that organisations such as the London Green Belt Council, the Association of North Thames Amenity Societies, the Potters Bar Society and the Hadley Wood Association have expressed their concerns.

Obviously, a scheme for a parkway station would need to be the subject of a planning application. Under national planning policy guidance on green belts, which is known as PPG2, such a development would be inappropriate in the green belt. To justify approval being given, it would therefore be necessary for GNER to show that very special circumstances outweighed the harm that would be done to the green belt. The land use planning merits of a station proposal would need to be considered against the statutory development plan, and careful regard would have to be paid to all other material considerations. Those might include, for example, the impact of the development on the environment and on residential amenity as well as the effect on the M25 and the local highway network. Should the local planning authority be minded to grant consent to a planning application, there remains the possibility that it might be called in by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for his own determination should it be thought to raise matters of more than local importance.

Last October, we set out land use planning policy on transport, including park and ride, in our consultation draft PPG13 on transport. That emphasised the need for park-and-ride schemes to be introduced as an integral part of the overall planning and transport approach for an area. They should be in the local transport plan, and based on a thorough assessment of travel impacts, and should also be in the development plan and consistent with the strategic context of the regional transport strategy.

In his speech on 13 December, which set out the Government's vision for transport policy, my right hon. Friend explained that the final version of PPG13, which is due out this year, would give priority to well-designed and well-conceived park-and-ride schemes. We are currently examining the responses to our public consultation on PPG13 and aim to publish the final version in the summer.

We are keen that local authorities should consider allocating sites for interchange in their development plans, for example, park-and-ride schemes to town centres and at bus and rail stations. I am aware that GNER objected to the deposit draft of the Hertsmere local plan on the grounds that it failed to support proposals for improvements to passenger services on the east coast main line and, in particular, the provision of a parkway station on land to the north of Hadley Wood. A public inquiry into the local plan was held last year and the inspector's report is still awaited. When it is received, Hertsmere borough council will consider the inspector's recommendations and decide whether any modifications to the plan are required. Those will then be published and the public will have an opportunity to express their views on the merits of the proposed modifications.

I reiterate that GNER's proposal must be regarded for the present as an option, not a firm and agreed package that can be implemented without further consultation. There is a process still to be gone through in which the planning, transport and wider environmental implications would need to be thoroughly considered. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate is reassured that any decisions will be taken only after the most careful consideration.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at four minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 January 2000

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Small Firms

[*Relevant documents: Thirteenth Report from the Trade and Industry Committee Session 1998–99 HC 330 and HC 49 Session 1999–2000 (Government Reply).*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

2.30 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): I am delighted to open our debate this afternoon on small firms, particularly because this is a happy side effect of Opposition Members' disgraceful behaviour in the House last night: the beneficial effect of not taking the Electronic Communications Bill in the House this afternoon is that I am able to be present at this debate. I want to put on record my thanks to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade, who would have opened this debate if I had been piloting the Bill in the House.

We are discussing an important subject and a sign of the importance that we attach to it is that we held a similar debate in June 1998 and a further debate in June 1999 on innovation and enterprise, both of which covered issues of importance to small businesses. I hope that we shall have an equally constructive and helpful debate this afternoon on how the Government can create the conditions in which more small businesses can start, survive and succeed.

Hon. Members will be aware of the wide-ranging report published last October by the Select Committee on Trade and Industry. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) here. In line with one of the Committee's recommendations, I am delighted that our debate will cover the wider enterprise agenda.

There is another reason why the debate is timely. I had the good fortune this morning to speak at the ceremony for the Parcelforce small business awards, which is one of the largest and best-established of the small business awards programmes. I am delighted that Parcelforce had more than 2,000 entries for the awards whose winners were announced today. That is a tribute to the spirit of enterprise that is alive and well in our country.

It is not Government but business that creates wealth. In the knowledge-driven economy, small businesses are the source of innovation, enterprise and growth. That does not mean, as some in the previous Administration made the mistake of believing, that Government can walk away and tell business to get on with the job. Our responsibility as a Government is to create the conditions in which business can succeed. That is what we are doing. The first and perhaps most important condition for success is an end to the boom and bust that has been so disastrous for investment and business for the past two decades. The first and continuing achievement of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is to steer a course of economic stability and growth. Taking politics out of decisions on interest rates has ensured not only that interest rates are at an historically low level, but that businesses can plan with confidence for a future of stability.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It will have come to your notice that the annunciator states that a debate is taking place here on small arms. Is it within your capacity to have that corrected?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I have anticipated him.

Ms Hewitt: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am under no illusion as to what we are discussing.

We have put an end to that damaging cycle of boom and bust, which saw interest rates peak at 15 per cent. and remain in double figures for four years. The economy that we inherited was set to repeat that damaging cycle. We now have a new and credible framework of monetary policy, inflation is historically low and is expected to remain close to the target figure, and the number of employed has risen by 700,000 since the general election. Virtually all that growth in employment has occurred in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. More people in this country are in employment than ever before. Levels of joblessness are at a 20-year low. Youth unemployment is down by more than 70 per cent. and long-term unemployment by more than 50 per cent. Those are achievements of which the Government can be proud.

Of course, the climate for small businesses is good. Barclays bank estimates that approximately a quarter of a million businesses started up in the first half of last year, which is more than started up in the first half of the previous year. Almost one million new businesses have started up under this Government. That is a higher average for each quarter than for the first half of the 1990s. In marked contrast, the lowest number of business start-ups on record—a pathetic 77,000 in one quarter—occurred under the previous Government.

While building a firm foundation for stability and success, we have also taken steps to ensure fairness for workers, families and communities. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) will probably tell us about the iniquities of regulation. Doubtless she and some of her right hon. and hon. Friends would like workers, some of whom are employed by small businesses, to continue to be paid a pittance and work excessively long hours with no right to paid holidays. We will not accept that. We believe that fairness and enterprise go hand in hand. That is what good, successful employers and businesses believe as well. We want our companies to compete on quality, not on the basis of how badly they can get away with treating their employees.

Of course, it is often difficult for small firms to access the support that they need, and especially sources of finance and information. We are working not only within Government but in partnership with the private sector and the not-for-profit sector to deliver the services and support that small businesses need. In particular, we are creating the new Small Business Service, which is a

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key part of the strategy to create an entrepreneurial Britain. Hon. Members are, I hope, aware that the results of last year's extensive consultation, together with our response to the issues raised, were published yesterday. I am delighted to say that there are 700 high-quality replies to that consultation from a wide cross-section of people, including representatives from a number of firms.

The new Small Business Service will build on the real advances made by the creation of business links. Everyone acknowledges that business links was a great improvement on the complete confusion that existed six or seven years earlier, but it is still not good enough. Small and medium businesses tell us constantly that quality is uneven. Some of the links deliver excellent services, but others are proving inadequate. For some years, the focus has been on larger businesses with high growth potential, so it can prove difficult for the sole trader and those who want to take up self-employment to get practical help.

First, the Small Business Service will help us to create the world-class business support services that our small and medium-sized businesses deserve. Secondly, it will help us to cut red tape. Thirdly, it will help us to simplify and streamline the support services that the Government offer to business. There is a large number of excellent programmes, but the number is so large that the small business person can sometimes have difficulty finding his or her way through. The Small Business Service will help us and it will help the small business customer.

As hon. Members can see from the response to our consultation, we are on the right track. Business across the country has given our vision for the Small Business Service a real welcome. Now we have to deliver on that vision, which we are doing by franchising through business links. We are asking the existing business links partnerships to make the first proposal for that new franchise, but making it clear that if the quality does not match the standard that we demand for our customers, we shall go out to open competitive tender. There are no illusions about the challenge for quality that we are setting for business links.

At the end of last year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced the appointment of David Irwin as the first chief executive of the Small Business Service. He has an outstanding record in the north-east as chief executive of Project Northeast, an entrepreneurial and largely commercially funded organisation. Its mission is support for start-ups and for small businesses. He will take up his post on 6 March, but I am happy to say that, thanks to e-mail, he is already closely engaged with officials in setting up the Small Business Service. I am sure that hon. Members will join me in welcoming David to his new post. He is ideally placed to develop the Small Business Service into the organisation that we and small businesses want.

Some of those who responded to our consultation questioned whether the chief executive would carry sufficient weight with Government. I can assure hon. Members that he has the confidence and the backing of the entire Government. He will have an independent right of direct access to the Prime Minister if there is an issue of particular importance. He will attend key ministerial meetings at which small business issues are discussed. He and the Small Business Service will have the right, but also the responsibility, to scrutinise all proposals for regulation and to examine in detail those that may affect small business, to ensure that the litmus test of thinking small first—thinking about the impact on the small business, the owner manager, the sole trader—is the starting point when considering the implications of regulation. He will also be a member of the new star chamber, the ministerial panel for regulatory accountability chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office. That panel will call to account Ministers from every Department, including my own, for their regulatory performance and programmes.

We want to deliver world-class business support services to the whole of the entrepreneurial community. That must include women entrepreneurs, who form a growing proportion of that community, although they are still under-represented in this country compared with, for example, the United States of America. It must also include entrepreneurs and potential entrepreneurs from the Afro-Caribbean and other minority ethnic communities, who have not, in the past, felt that the mainstream business support services understood their needs or responded well to them. We must also reach out to support the development of both social and commercial enterprise within the most disadvantaged areas. Regulation is of particular concern to small businesses. We are determined to address that through the Small Business Service, through the existing task force on better regulation, and now through the new ministerial panel on regulatory accountability.

I must also refer to the extraordinary comments made this morning by the British Chambers of Commerce. I have great respect for that organisation, and for its director general, Chris Humphries. In my experience as Minister with responsibility for small business, I have found it a valuable source of advice and information on what is going on in the business community and on all its concerns, but the numbers that it published this morning about the so-called regulatory burden are nonsense. I notice that, an hour or so ago, it issued a revised version of those numbers. They are coming down hourly, but there are at least two difficulties with the numbers issued. The first and most important is that they include the so-called burden of the benefits to workers of the working time directive.

The working time directive is about paid holidays for employees and making sure that they are not forced by their employer to work 70, 80 or 85 hours a week to the detriment of their own and their family's health and often to the detriment of customers and the productivity of the business. There are real benefits to employees from the working time directive, but those are the costs that the BCC has included.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Does the Minister agree with Lord Haskins, who described her Government's stewardship of the working time directive as a dog's breakfast?

Ms Hewitt: The hon. Lady overlooks the fact that we consulted business carefully about the way in which we should implement the working time directive. In response to that consultation, we have significantly

changed the administrative way in which it will be implemented. The administrative costs included in the business burdens listed by the British Chambers of Commerce are out of date. They are figures that would have existed for the old way of administering the directive, but because we have listened to business and got rid of the record-keeping requirements that increased red tape and administrative burdens, we have got rid of them.

The same is true of the minimum wage. The British Chambers of Commerce has included a substantial figure, although it has changed a couple of times already today, for the administrative costs of the national minimum wage; but we listened to business on how the national minimum wage should be implemented and, having listened, we decided not to pursue some of the options that had originally been proposed in the consultation, including the option to include the minimum wage on the payslip, with the effect that the administrative costs to business of the national minimum wage are virtually zero.

Mrs. Browning: In tidying up some of the nonsense around the administration of the national minimum wage, has the Minister also removed the requirement in statute for directors of limited companies to pay themselves the minimum wage, whether they want to draw that salary or not?

Ms Hewitt: I am not sure that I immediately know the answer to that question, as I am not the Minister with direct responsibility for the national minimum wage, but I shall come back to that point, if I may.

I also want to draw the Chamber's attention to an extremely interesting interview on the BBC's lunchtime business news with one small business man, the director of Rowan Yarns, an excellent company, in Holmfirth. He said that he ran a successful small firm by employing good people, and that he got good people—most of his work force are women—by ensuring that they could balance work and family and did not have to sit at work worrying about their families all day. He is perfectly happy to pay a decent wage and to have good conditions. When the interviewer said, "But surely you have noticed this terrible increase in red tape and administrative burdens over the last two years," he said, "No, actually, I haven't noticed anything of the kind and I think that what's happening is right."

Finally on this point, I want to draw the Chamber's attention to the recent report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, which examined administrative and economic regulations in the member states and concluded, on the basis of an exhaustive analysis, that the country that imposed the least administrative and economic regulation on its businesses, large and small, was the United Kingdom. We are determined to do even better, but let us not exaggerate the position that we start from and let us not confuse fair standards for employees that will help businesses to improve the quality and productivity of their work force with administrative costs, which we should simplify and strip out wherever possible.

Mr. Chope: What is happening in respect of the payroll service? That involves legitimate administrative costs that are especially burdensome to new small businesses.

Ms Hewitt: That is another happy example of consulting with and listening to small business. We knew that small businesses were particularly concerned about payroll administration and the implications of the working families tax credit. We consulted them on a proposal to introduce a payroll voucher, which would have helped with the costs of payroll administration, but they told us clearly that they did not want that, but rather the kind of one-to-one advice that the Inland Revenue can provide. Just before Christmas, my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary and I announced that investment was to be put into expanding the Inland Revenue's NESI—new enterprise support initiative—scheme, which enables new businesses, in particular, to get tailored advice on how to administer their payroll.

One of the best ways of slashing administrative costs, including those of payroll administration, is by exploiting information and communications technology. I should like to dwell for a moment on electronic commerce.

Mr. Chope: Regarding payroll, it was said at the time of the previous Budget that a substantial sum—about £70 million—was to be made available to the Small Business Service to administer the payroll. Now that it is no longer to be charged with that responsibility, is that £70 million still available to help small businesses in other ways?

Ms Hewitt: As I have already said, we are investing in an expansion of the Inland Revenue's one-to-one support service for small business, because that is a service that small business wants. When we publish the budget for the Small Business Service, the hon. Gentleman will see the full figures. He will also see, in April, the launch of an immensely exciting new initiative—an internet-based gateway to all Government business support information and services, aimed directly at the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. It will be available on-line—for those who are on-line—or through a call centre or through advisers for those who want indirect access.

It is essential that our small businesses exploit to the full the power of electronic commerce. We have in our country some world-class small businesses that are helping to lead the way in e-commerce.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): Will the Minister expand on that? I believe that a trial scheme is in operation whereby when one registers as a self-employed person, one can fill out a form that can then be distributed electronically. That is a welcome development. How is that progressing, how quickly is it to be expanded so that it can be used more widely, and how many people are aware of its existence?

Ms Hewitt: I was delighted to find that shortly after coming into Government we ran an experiment that took the four forms that someone becoming self-employed had to complete, and turned them into a single form. As the hon. Gentleman said, it was then

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trialled as an electronic intelligent form. The single form is still in use, and I have asked officials to ensure that it is one of the services that is offered as part of the electronic gateway for the Small Business Service. It is an excellent initiative that needs to be made more widely known and available. It is just one small example of the power of electronic commerce to transform the ways in which small businesses interact with Government and, by doing so, reduce their administrative costs.

I am worried that although there are some shining examples of firms exploiting e-commerce, if one looks across the piece at our small—especially very small-firms, they are lagging behind. Our benchmarking study, published last year, suggested that our smallest firms were at the bottom of the G7 league table for the use of information and communication technology. They cannot afford to be left behind in that regard because within a year or two the internet will be as common and as essential to business as the telephone is today.

We have rolled out across the country information society initiative support centres and ISI local centres. I opened one in Luton yesterday. They are already delivering objective advice to small businesses in plain English. That advice is driven not by the desire to sell a product but by business needs and a desire to establish how information and communication technology can be applied within their business.

The results are outstanding. Optimum Designs, based in Wigan, is a sportswear firm, and it was one of the first companies to come to the ISI centre. It was given help in setting up a full e-commerce transactional website. As a result, during its first 12 months of internet trading, its turnover increased tenfold. Across the country small businesses have experienced extraordinary increases in markets and extraordinary reductions in the cost base. That shows the power of electronic commerce and explains why I am so passionate about the synergy between the two parts of my ministerial role.

Our country led the world into the first industrial revolution. We are determined that we should be the winners and leaders in the new knowledge-driven economy in which small businesses have a vital role to play.

I have not been able in the time available to describe many of the other programmes and support services that we are working on with businesses. I look forward to the rest of the debate and to responding to the points that hon. Members raise.

2.56 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I declare two non-registerable interests as a former director of the Small Business Bureau and the current president of Women into Business; neither post has been remunerated.

I am delighted that at long last a debate has been devoted to small business. When the Labour party came to power, it promised an annual debate on this subject. When the then Financial Secretary, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), presented the first small business debate, she flagged it up as an event that we could look forward to. During the past year, however, and despite many promptings from the Dispatch Box from Conservative Members, the Government have not made time for a debate dedicated to small business. We are glad that the debate is being held today, although it is late. Conservative Members would have preferred it if the debate had taken place on the Floor of the House. That would have given due recognition to the importance of this sector of our economy.

The Labour Government are now into their third year. I listened carefully to the Minister, who gave the impression that during those three years things had only got better for small businesses. In fact, the reverse is the case.

The Prime Minister characteristically pledged before and during the general election that this Government would cut red tape. He said that they would not impose burdensome regulations on business because they understood that successful businesses need to keep costs down. In November 1997, he discussed the importance of investing in people, skills and technology rather than regulation and the imposition of constant burdens on employers, and he added that he wanted to reduce costs and burdens. That signalled for the first time a different direction.

The information that the Minister cited from British Chambers of Commerce and the figures that just about every small business organisation has presented during the past year show that, as a result of the Labour Government's initiatives during their first two years in power, there are additional regulatory burdens on business, especially on small businesses. The problem is of such proportions that now, in year three, it is starting to do significant damage.

I share the Minister's enthusiasm for the event that she attended this morning, at which she presented small business awards. Through Women into Business, I run an annual business award scheme, so I know how encouraging it is to see businesses flourishing and being recognised for their success. However, I hope that the Minister will take seriously what she hears today. She should acquaint herself with something other than celebrating those who have done well; she should focus on those who are failing under new Labour.

The Government's record on business, enterprise, and especially small business, was summed up in the 13th report of the Trade and Industry Committee, which was published last year. It stated:

"From the situation as we saw it a year ago, where there seemed to be something of a policy vacuum on SMEs, we have moved to one where there is at least some risk of an excess of loosely connected and apparently uncoordinated policy initiatives shooting off in all directions, generating noise and interest, but not commensurate light."

This debate—the so-called annual small and medium-sized enterprises debate—should provide an opportunity for the Minister. I have heard nothing, apart from what she said about the future of e-commerce in this country, with which I agree, that can be described as anything other than abject complacency on the part of the Government.

The Minister will not be surprised to know that hon. Members of all parties have studied the information released by the British Chambers of Commerce in the past 24 hours. Its base line is constructed on compliance

cost assessment figures supplied by the Government. If the Minister is saying that those assessments are wrong, as a result of putting right the mess that the Government made of at least 20 pieces of legislation, we would welcome that, but we shall press her for revised, accurate figures. She will understand our suspicion about the Government's figures on business, the cost to business, and support for small businesses, given that the 13th report of the Trade and Industry Committee questions the happy-clappy way in which Ministers use figures to repackage good news and, as we have heard this afternoon, suppress bad news. I give the Minister 10 out of 10 for consistency, because that is the approach not only of her and her Department, but of the whole Government.

What has happened in the past two to three years under new Labour? The British Chambers of Commerce, the Institute of Directors, the Centre for Policy Studies, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Forum of Private Business, the Confederation of British Industry, and all the other recognised business organisations, recognise the burden on business, as the British Chambers of Commerce described it, created by £10 billion of Labour red tape. The blame is laid clearly at the door of the Government. There is a burden barometer, which shows that, from day one, this Government have been ideologically driven. One of their first acts was to sign up to the social chapter, which allowed the application not only of new legislation but of retrospective legislation to which other European countries had signed up. That is beginning to hurt, and it is storing up problems for the future. If it hurts now, it will become very painful in the coming years.

The problem, of course, is that the smallest businesses feel the pain far more than those with an in-house lawyer, who sorts out the legal side of compliance, and a payroll department, which can deal with administration. The bigger businesses will also eventually feel the cost, which will filter through into competitiveness. The smaller companies feel the pain first, however, and they are beginning to shout. Instead of being complacent, the Minister should listen to what they are saying. This is not about tossing statistics between bodies—a million here or a billion there over two, three, four or five years—but about individual businesses and people. The Government have made a virtue of people. The Minister is right to say that people are important in business. Employers need to have highly skilled people and to ensure that morale is high.

What the Opposition predicted when we saw the tide of legislation that the Government have rushed to implement is beginning to materialise. The rhetoric was apparent from the start. In tandem with the rush to increase the cost, regulation and administration of small and medium-sized enterprises, the Government established the better regulation task force—not the deregulation or less regulation task force, but the better regulation task force. What a mockery that made of how they imposed the working time directive, the minimum wage and other horrors on business. There was nothing businesslike about the Government's actions. There was no recognition of the lead time that businesses need to change systems, brief their staff and comply with the law. That is an important consideration because most of the legislation imposes heavy penalties if the letter of the law is not followed.

Ms Hewitt: Is the hon. Lady aware that the British Chambers of Commerce told the Low Pay Commission that businesses recognise that a low-wage policy leads to a vicious circle of low morale, low performance and low productivity? Does she realise that the British Chambers of Commerce, unlike the Conservative party, supports a minimum wage and that the Confederation of British Industry described the introduction of the minimum wage as a model of how to legislate?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody): Order. Interventions must be brief, even if they are ministerial.

Mrs. Browning: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The minimum wage was debated in the House, but having got it on the statute book, the Government have not been businesslike in their use of secondary legislation or in the advice that they have given to businesses on how they should apply the legislation in the workplace. They have shown no understanding of how businesses, especially small businesses, work. They must get to grips with the fact that it is a burden for businesses to read and apply, with only a few weeks' notice, what is contained in a document that has more than 100 pages. By definition, a burden is a cost on business. Individual documents might seem significant, but the cumulative effect of more than two years of a continual tide of regulation is starting to damage British business.

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): Does the hon. Lady agree that part of the remit of regulation is to help and guide business, which is the case with telecom licences? The Conservative Government introduced about 3,000 regulations for each of the last three years of their Administration.

Mrs. Browning: I will come in a moment to what the Conservative party intends to do to save British business from the consequences of this tide of regulation. The hon. Lady is right: the point is how regulation is applied. Her intervention could not have come at a more opportune moment.

Ms Perham: I must be a plant.

Mrs. Browning: We will keep that between ourselves; it might not do the hon. Lady's career much good if the Whips hear that.

A report produced only last week by Peninsula, the Manchester law company, showed the biggest ever increase in the number of businesses seeking advice on how they should apply legislation and revealed that more than 32,000 more calls were made this year than last year. Businesses are spending more and more time that they could use to do business ringing up for advice and trying to find out how they can do the Government's business, which is to apply all the legislation that they are imposing. More than two years ago, the Opposition predicted that the burden on

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businesses would become so great that it would start to affect their success and competitiveness. Indeed, Peninsula predicted in its report that more business failures would result. That announcement comes on top of the Dun and Bradstreet report of 4 January, which clearly showed that business failures increased by more than 12 per cent. in 1999, which is the third largest increase in a decade. The report also revealed a fatality total of 830 businesses going under a week, which is the highest for five years.

I remind the Minister of the economic scene that she set at the outset of her remarks. She spoke of low inflation, low unemployment and the right economic backdrop for business growth. If she believes that the economy is so wonderful and that the Treasury's economic management is so good, she must wonder why more and more businesses are going under. The two arguments do not correlate. What does she think the answer is? Why are more businesses going under in the wonderful economic environment that the Government claim to have provided? They will find that the answer lies in what they have done in just over two years. They have increased taxes on business and the cost of regulation.

Whatever the benefits of low unemployment and of lower inflation or lower interest rates—I remind hon. Members that interest rates are now creeping up—they are overtaken by the Government's own hands and by their intervention in taxing and regulating to such an extent that it is causing business damage. Unfortunately, predictions from organisations considering the trends show that we can expect those circumstances to get worse and not better during coming years. "Things can only get better," somebody once said; and Labour Members still believe it.

One of the things that Britain must do if it is to succeed and to use the excellent talent that it has in small firms is to enable small businesses to grow into medium-sized businesses. For many years, our competitors such as Germany succeeded in doing so, although circumstances there are not looking quite so rosy now. We have lessons to learn from such countries on how to grow small businesses into medium-sized businesses. Many factors, such as access to capital, are involved, and they are all subjects for legitimate debate.

Only last week, I visited a medium-sized company that has been kind enough to prepare for me some details of its regulatory burden. It currently employs 400 people and has grown from a small company to its present size. It has examined its revenue and regulatory costs in relation to its financial figures for the end of 1998. Subtraction of those costs from the company's revenue reveals that its regulatory burden is the equivalent of 8.4 per cent. of its operating overheads, excluding depreciation. The regulatory cost represents 46.3 per cent. of its profits after tax and is the equivalent of 193.6 per cent. of its corporation tax payments.

Despite the rosy picture of the economic climate painted by the Minister, other factors burden business. The factors are not obscure: they are immediately apparent to anyone when the regulatory burdens are broken down. Regulatory charges, environmental taxes, compliance costs, health and safety and employment burdens—and, gosh, employment legislation has grown so much in the past two years—represent a significant burden when added to the requirement to pay corporation tax and the other necessary charges on the company's accounts.

The Conservative party will take no lessons from new Labour. Neither business nor we shall be lulled into a false sense of security, feeling that all is well and that everything will get better. The Government will shortly precipitate a downturn typified by business failures unless they act.—[*Interruption.*] The Minister laughs. If she thinks that the Dun and Bradstreet figures are funny or if she is prepared to dismiss small business failure, fair enough. Let us say that that is the price to be paid for the happy-clappy-keep-'em-all-happy song. If she is not prepared to take the issue seriously, the problem that I have outlined will be accelerated over the coming two years.

Ms Hewitt: Is the hon. Lady aware that Dun and Bradstreet expect the number of business failures to fall this year

"as a result of the improvement in the economy"?

Mrs Browning: Whenever a statistic is heard, the Government, and especially this Department and this Minister do not want to believe it and so pluck another out of the air. The Minister will have seen the Dun and Bradstreet figures and heard what I said about the law firm that studied the problem of the burden placed on business in the Manchester area. The problems are having an effect not only individually on businesses but cumulatively, and they are starting to bite into the country's economic success.

We would not merely create more star chambers and similar bodies, holding dinners at Lancaster house as a first act. The new deregulatory hope for the country started with a dinner at Lancaster house with a few representatives of the companies in the FTSE-100—not many small businesses there. Is that the priority and the way in which deregulation will be advanced—with talk and proposals for better regulation, but with no commitment to rolling back regulation? The Conservatives will roll back regulation, making significant changes to the culture in Whitehall.

I was formerly a Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food—they know all about regulation there, believe me. The Minister has an opportunity to roll back regulation. If we are to have more than words, she will have to be pretty smart. We will introduce regulatory budgets, with every Department and Secretary of State reporting not only to the Cabinet Secretary but to Parliament. Departments will report on reductions in cash terms, against a declared budgetary target, in the regulations impacting on business for which they are responsible. Only by our reducing the cost impact on business will businesses start to feel the burden less. If the Minister does not act quickly, she will have passed the point of no return.

3.18 pm

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) began by complaining about the delay in holding this debate. Listening to what she said, I thought that she could almost have been speaking on 2 May 1997 because she

seemed to have ignored everything that the Government have sought to place on the agenda for the small business debate. She delivered a meaningless, spiteful rant about regulation and said nothing about anything else relating to small business. She sought to disparage the obvious facts about the improved economic climate of which my hon. Friend the Minister spoke at the start of the debate.

I remember visiting small businesses in my constituency during the 20 years for which I have been a Member of Parliament and being told that they had terrible problems with interest rates. Rates are now low; I would like them lower. I would like us to enter the European monetary system at the appropriate time, so that we may enjoy the interest rates that our colleagues in Europe currently have. I do not know whether the hon. Lady would like us to reduce the burden by taking that route. If she answered at all positively, I am sure that the bleeper would quickly go off. I do not know whether we would welcome her into our ranks as a bleeper refugee, but there is always rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents.

I remember complaints about inflation of 15 to 20 per cent. in the early 1980s, about the problems of the burdens that were going to be on small businesses and about having to deal with high wage rises. Some have had to deal with big wage rises because of the introduction of the national minimum wage. Sadly, the working terms and conditions of people working in small businesses in this country have often been inferior to those of people working in larger businesses. They have had to put up with low pay, and holidays, time off and family-friendly conditions have been given grudgingly. The boss was delightful and he really liked the employees, but he usually exploited their proximity and close relations.

Such employees were often open to the abuse of their reasonable freedoms, including the right to be free from wage exploitation and poverty pay. If enforcing those freedoms requires detailed regulation because mean-minded employers will not meet their social and legal responsibilities, so be it. They must be told about such matters because, in the past, left to the free market, far too many employees of small businesses did not get a decent living wage.

Mrs. Browning: Why does the hon. Gentleman think that hon. Members of all parties are being inundated with correspondence from people saying how unfair the Government's parental leave directive is because it is unpaid? The wealthy and those on good salaries can take advantage of it, but not others. It is immaterial whether one supports parental leave. Is it not strange that the Government have introduced a popular measure but expected business to pick up the tab?

Mr. O'Neill: If the hon. Lady is suggesting that we should increase taxation to fund the measure—

Mrs Browning: I am not.

Mr. O'Neill: Most current public expenditure is paid for by taxation, which the hon. Lady's party never ceases to try to find means of reducing. It is a bit much for her to say that parental leave is good and that the Government should fund it. Those who run businesses must consider their social as well as their financial responsibilities. Those social responsibilities extend to their employees.

I should like to proceed to speak briefly about another matter, Mrs.—I mean Madam Deputy Speaker. I have known you for so long as "Mrs. Dunwoody" that your elevated title escapes me at times.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not mind what the hon. Gentleman calls me, so long as he does not call me some of the things that I have been called in the Labour party.

Mr. O'Neill: I do not know whether I should call you comrade, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The debate ought to be taken seriously. The Conservatives could have used one of their Opposition day debates had they thought the subject that important. We have seen the emergence of the Small Business Service, the appointment of David Irwin and the encouraging willingness of the Government to study the American model of small business administration. The presence in the United Kingdom for the past 12 months of Philip Lader, the United States Ambassador, who was head of the Small Business Administration there, has been helpful. He did that work as a member of one of the early Clinton cabinets, because of the separation of powers and the way in which they run their Government. That kind of appointment is not possible in the United Kingdom, but we have a reasonable compromise. David Irwin is at the heart of the Government machine. He is not accountable in the sense of being required to come to the Floor of the House, but he can, and I am sure will before too long, be invited to the Select Committee, which I have the honour to chair. We are very interested in that.

Doors were opened to us in the United States through the good offices of Philip Lader. We were able to have lengthy discussions with several of the players in the Small Business Administration, which has been in operation since the 1950s. It was introduced by a fairly right-wing Republican Administration, led by President Eisenhower, but has built up over the years expertise in assisting small businesses and an ability to identify their problems. Its cumulative experience has allowed advice and assistance to be provided through a sophisticated mentoring scheme.

When, before the general election, we considered the operation of business links, we found it disturbing that its advice and mentoring service had several shortcomings. I do not want to be offensive to the people who were involved in it, but some were failed business people who did not have the get up and go to start a business again and were looking for the soft option of explaining to people how they had gone wrong and telling them, "Make sure you don't do as I did; do as I say." That is a perfectly legitimate view, but not really the positive approach for which one would hope. We want a mentoring scheme in which the mentors have been successful people, able to show best practice.

If we can do something about the insolvency legislation, which is, as it were, pencilled into the Government's agenda at present, we shall have a greater tolerance of business failure. Of course it is distressing to

[Mr. O'Neill]

see businesses go to the wall. However, especially in the case of small businesses, we do not want the people involved, who often lose many of their assets and even their homes, to be denied access to financial support and even to the mainstream of business life. That is almost kicking people when they are down. A consensus exists and the draft legislation on the issue has been broadly welcomed. I hope that it will be presented to the House.

We should recognise that we need a climate of economic confidence in the country and in business, so that business people will be prepared to come back after things have not gone right for them. Some of the mentors whom we met in the United States said that they gave most support to, and most wanted to encourage, the folk who had failed—because they would not fail again, given half a chance; they would not want to go through the trauma. There are, in the bones of the Small Business Service, causes for optimism about those matters.

With respect to the payroll service, matters need to be cleared up. The Government were going to introduce something that might have involved the R-word, but cast their net wide, consulted, and came up with something else. One of the good things about them is that they occasionally find the time to pause and reflect. They are often big enough to admit that they may have got things wrong and there might be a better approach. The Conservatives' rather mean-minded approach of dwelling only on the imposition of particular types of regulation, in support of objectives with which they disagree, is unfortunate and is skewing the debate.

The Electronic Communications Bill is important, because if the American experience shows anything, electronic commerce can enable small businesses to widen and simplify their marketing through the use of websites and networking. Businesses are flourishing in a way that was never imagined by using those facilities. Admittedly, America is a big country and has always had the network of the catalogues—the Sears Roebuck culture—to a far greater extent than here. Women who worked in major textile mills in my constituency bought many of their clothes and Christmas presents through the Littlewoods catalogue, but in America many more people have been used to living in remote places, far from the main street store, and have chosen to shop in that way.

We do not have so much of the American communications-retailing culture, and we have the terrible problem of having to pay for local telephone calls. That has resulted in businesses being reluctant to become involved in electronic commerce, or to go on the net, because of the fear that keeping lines open for 24 hours a day, 60 minutes per hour, would cost a fortune. Indeed, an American to whom I spoke was incredulous when I explained our problems with the local call syndrome. He said that it was rather like going to a shopping mall and being given a meter that requires one to pay for every minute spent in the mall.

There are encouraging signs. Hon. Members on the Select Committee have successfully twisted BT's arm. It was no secret that we were to interview the Director General of Telecommunications at 10 am. Lo and behold, on the same morning BT produced the first package offering free internet access—not just for getting on the internet, but for using it. Admittedly, there is no such thing as a free phone call, just as there is no such thing as a free lunch. However, there will be more opportunities, through packages, for freedom from anxiety about an open telephone line capable of receiving calls 24 hours a day through e-mail.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Will the hon. Gentleman join me in regretting the feebleness of clause 10 of the Electronic Communications Bill? Does he agree that it should tackle the problem more effectively and that an attempt should be made to get BT to act faster and sooner? Without fast action we—I mean small businesses, in particular—will be losers in the matter of access to the net.

Mr. O'Neill: One of the hon. Gentleman's problems is that he has perhaps forgotten in his impatience that we live in a free enterprise economy and that it is not always possible, even for Governments who from time to time want to be interventionist, to interfere in the markets—especially regulated markets.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Monopoly markets.

Mr. O'Neill: No, it is not a monopoly market—perhaps it is oligopolistic, or has a dominant player, but there is a fair amount of competition. There are about 35 players in telecoms. I am groping for a figure, but my point is that the market is not helpful in several respects, because of the dominance of BT. However, BT is the big tanker that takes a while to turn around. It is turning because smaller players are coming into the game and nibbling away at its market share. It has moved, and the Government are to be congratulated on that. Nothing in law requires the Director General of Telecommunications to get BT to move.

The original question was whether the Government were doing anything. I said that it was the regulator's responsibility. It would be open to legal challenge were the regulator to be given the power to intervene and dictate to a single company in a free market.

The climate in telecommunications is changing. BT is moving. We had to kick it, shove it, embarrass it and abuse it in the Select Committee. A bit of rough trade goes on there from time to time—in the best sense of the term, I hasten to say. We have seen the beginning of a movement. When the biggest player moves, I think that there will be a significant change. We are putting the legislation in place. We have been able to avoid some of the worst excesses that were being forced on us by the forces of darkness in terms of key escrow and the restrictions on electronic commerce, but step by step the pieces are being put in place.

We must weigh up the initiatives that the Government are suggesting and the current economic climate. Only 12 months ago we were hearing sad noises about big business, the macro-economy and the whole British economy, to say nothing of the European economy, which Conservative Members do not like and know nothing about, although that does not prevent them from expressing opinions on it; ignorance has never been a barrier to expressing opinions in the House.

In the past 12 months we have seen a transformation and a consolidation in our economy. There is nothing to suggest that that will not continue in the months ahead.

The moaning and, as we say in Scotland, the girning and greeting that we have heard about regulation will be put into perspective and we will see that it is just a minor irritation in the development of small businesses, for which the Government deserve a great deal of credit and the support of the House.

3.37 pm

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I want to fire two shots over the bows in both directions. I welcome today's debate. I was concerned that it would perhaps not take place and that it would clash with the Electronic Communications Bill, which many of us are interested in too. I must also refer to the appalling behaviour of Conservative Members last night, which resulted in the business being changed, but let me move on in a more constructive manner.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Cotter: In the short time that we have I want to concentrate on the debate.

The Minister rightly referred to the economic background, which was helpful. I should repeat that I run a small business. It is an interest that I have declared, but perhaps I should declare it publicly again in this debate. Currently I am struggling to keep it well on the rails. I want to express a small concern about one aspect of the country's economic performance—the high value of the pound. It does not necessarily affect small businesses directly—it does not in my case—but it affects many of my customers, who find it increasingly difficult to trade. I shall not drift into a big discussion of how I feel that that could be improved, but the Minister knows some of the Liberal Democrat views about that.

As we all know, small businesses remain an extremely important part of the economy, with 3.7 million in the United Kingdom, and they have been an important sector for the work force. The debate gives me a good opportunity to talk about the Small Business Service, to which the Minister referred. I welcome it, because I hope that it will genuinely replace the past proliferation of bodies such as the training and enterprise councils, business links and enterprise agencies, which perhaps waste money and resources. As the Minister has said, some of those bodies are not performing particularly well, and we look to this new organisation to make up that deficiency.

I am worried that the chief executive, who will bear a great responsibility on the small business community's behalf, will not be directly responsible to Parliament, and we shall have to approach the Minister on such matters. The hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) referred to the United States example, where the chief executive responsible for small businesses is a member of the Cabinet. I hope that the new organisation will adopt a direct approach and, unlike past organisations, accept responsibility. I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on that.

Extensive reference has been made to regulation, which is of increasing concern to business. As the Minister and others will argue, regulation is necessary to create the conditions in which employees and businesses can thrive. In that respect, the Opposition's worries about the national minimum wage have proved to be totally without foundation. Nevertheless, I hope that the Small Business Service will examine regulation on behalf of business people.

The latest survey by the Forum of Private Business shows that employment regulation is an issue of importance that is second only to business rates. I shall not say too much about business rates this afternoon, except to note that many firms that the forum represents are particularly worried about that issue.

The need for deregulation is clear. Recent research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that administration costs fall disproportionately heavily on small businesses. The estimated administration cost of hiring one person was £330 for small businesses, and £404 for businesses inexperienced in the attendant bureaucracy. However, the equivalent cost for businesses that employ more than 5,000 people is only £5. That is a tremendous difference. Employees of a small business often have to fulfil a number of different roles, and I can attest to the difficulties that such businesses have in finding, employing and training suitable people.

A number of worries have been expressed about regulation. We support the working families tax credit in principle, but we are concerned about its implementation. Moreover, it has undoubtedly placed an extra burden on the small business community.

Despite the Minister's comments, hon. Members were concerned about the way in which the working time directive was implemented. There was insufficient debate in the House, and very little notice was given to business. Certainly, my small business received little information on it.

An announcement was made this week about consultation on a part-time workers directive. Again, the time scale is short: regulations must be enforced by 7 April. That will not allow sufficient time for the consultation to be properly carried out, for Parliament to have a proper opportunity to debate it, or for small firms and other firms to get advance notice of what is coming up.

Another matter of grave concern is the glib presentation of impact assessments relating to Bills. Often, impact assessments are not linked to Bills until shortly before Second Reading. Ideally, they should form part of the Bill when it is first published, so that the potential cost effects can be properly considered before it progresses. Furthermore, impact assessments are often put together in such a way as to be misleading. I intend to continue to address that matter on behalf of my party in future. For example, the impact assessments that were produced to accompany the Employment Relations Bill estimated the average cost to employers of implementing parental leave to be £140. However, that figure was reached by estimating the total costs to the 15 per cent. or so of employers that were likely to be affected, and then dividing them by the total number of employers. That figure was completely meaningless, and obscured the far more relevant figure of £935, which appears in black and white as the estimated cost to a firm of arranging cover for one individual taking parental leave. I should like to see more precise figures and a better impact assessment process. Impact assessments are often narrow in concept. I look forward to the Minister's response to those points, today or in the future.

[Mr. Cotter]

There should be an annual general impact assessment to consider all the regulations that are introduced and provide some clear figures on the total administrative burden that weighs on small businesses. The House should be able to consider and debate the costs on an annual rolling basis. The Government have made it clear that they intend to make regulation as fair and light as possible. They should have the courage of their convictions and allow us to assess the impact as the year goes on. I shall say no more about regulation, as I am sure that the subject will arise again.

Several Government actions have not been helpful. For example, the changes to capital gains tax made a mockery of the plans of many retiring small business owners who had anticipated that the sale of their business would provide a nest egg for their old age. A recent debate on sub-post offices revealed the great uncertainty that exists about their future. I am sure that other hon. Members have met sub-postmasters and mistresses who are worried about their nest egg and the way in which they were led to expect that certain aspects of their business would continue.

In the interests of giving other hon. Members a chance to speak, I shall refer only briefly to the Government's actions in respect of IR35, which have created difficulties for many small contractors. I merely flag up that I do not intend to lose sight of that. It was an unnecessary use of a sledgehammer to crack a nut, and it will return to haunt the Government in due course.

Consultation on legislation and impact assessments are crucial. People who run small businesses are slightly ahead of civil servants in their knowledge of the problems and difficulties involved. I welcome the interchange programme, whereby civil servants and others can acquire experience in companies, but the scheme relates only to large companies. They work for two years or more in the Shells and BPs of this world, but I suggest to the Minister that consideration should be given to expanding the interchange scheme to include the smallest companies so that civil servants and, perhaps, Ministers could sit alongside a small business owner—for example, the owner of a garage or small shop—for a week or two. They would then see for themselves the real problems facing small businesses. There is a great lack of knowledge about the smallest of businesses. That comes up time and again. Large businesses receive appreciation of their problems, but small businesses do not, as I know to my cost because I ran a small business in years past and had to do the VAT books and so on at 1 and 2 o'clock in the morning.

The hon. Member for Ochil referred to the Electronic Communications Bill. We all agree that electronic communication is a tremendous challenge and a great opportunity for small and other businesses but, as I said when discussing the Bill, it must be made absolutely clear, particularly to small businesses, that it is not simply a matter of obtaining a web site and plonking something on it. An article on e-commerce in *The Guardian* today stated that

"we're not quite there yet, US retailers made billions from wired consumers last Christmas but they also lost billions. One source estimated that poorly designed websites cost American retailers six billion dollars in potential sales".

I shall not continue, but there is much more in the article.

I make a plea for the Small Business Service to consider the matter seriously. The Minister said that she had opened a centre yesterday and referred to a firm that has done extremely well, but for every one that does extremely well, many struggle to take on new ways of business. I plead with the Minister to ensure that small businesses are able to appreciate the pros and cons of e-commerce opportunities.

The hon. Member for Ochil referred to mentoring and the concern that many of us feel about the quality of the advice given to small businesses and of mentoring schemes. I have been involved with the Prince's Youth Business Trust and I am sure that the Minister knows how effective that has been in following through its support for small businesses, shown in its success rate. In general, two thirds of small businesses in this country fail and only one third continue for more than five years and become successful. The British Chambers of Commerce stated that one of the aims of the Small Business Service is to encourage more start-ups. I would say, what about carry-ons? It is important to help firms to carry on, because it is no good having many start-ups if not many carry on. A crucial element is to ensure that business mentors are properly accredited. That has not happened in the past and an accreditation scheme should be put in place so that we can assess their worth and ability.

I want to give other hon. Members an opportunity to speak in this welcome debate. We must watch carefully the development of the Small Business Service, which I expect will replace the previous system and be more effective. Throughout the coming year I shall inquire or make speeches about progress in this regard.

3.55 pm

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): The Minister made a profound point when she said that the Government's most important act was to create an economic climate in which small businesses could flourish. In fact, the Government have created a climate in which business can flourish. Small businesses flourish when they trade with larger businesses, and vice versa. It is vital that all parts of the economy have such opportunities. That is the single most important task that the Government have performed.

There was a brief but interesting exchange between the Minister and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), the Opposition spokesperson. The hon. Lady said that we would have to go back five years to find a period when business failures were worse than they are currently. That was one of the last years of the previous Conservative Government, who had a disastrous record and who failed to create a climate in which small or larger businesses could function.

I warmly endorse my hon. Friend the Minister's comments on the importance of providing adequate services for the development of businesses among Afro-Caribbean entrepreneurs. Despite the fact that that community is now well established in this country, development of Afro-Caribbean businesses has been hindered. We need to examine why they have not grown and what can be done to rectify the problem. There are

examples of good practice—I pay tribute to the Cariocca business park in my constituency, which is Afro-Caribbean led and which has helped to ensure that people have access to appropriate advice and mentoring. The important concept of mentoring was discussed by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter). It is particularly important when there is a thinness of culture—people should have access to others who can add practical value in terms of management and business operation.

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): My hon. Friend mentioned the Afro-Caribbean community. Does he agree that the Asian community has made a tremendous contribution to the business sector? Who would have believed 10 or 15 years ago that the success that it enjoys would have been possible? Despite the difficulties that ethnic minorities generally face, the Asian community has done well and we should recognise its tremendous spirit. Thanks are due to many Labour local councils and authorities for the help that they have given Asian businesses.

Mr. Lloyd: I join my hon. Friend in suggesting that Labour councils have a particularly good record. A quick walk around the centre of my constituency and the centre of Manchester would reveal the dynamism of Asian-run businesses. Asian businesses have bought older properties in the centre of Manchester and helped to ensure that it once again experiences enormous economic dynamism.

Perhaps I should be slightly pedantic and point out that that dynamism involves only a subset of the Asian community. My hon. Friend anticipated a point that I wanted to make. Such access is patchy. The Bangladeshi community, for example, does not enjoy the same business success as the Indian and Pakistani communities. We need to address the cultural phenomenon that might be involved.

I put in a special plea for the newer communities that arrived here recently, including the Somalian community. Its members lag a long way behind in the development of entrepreneurial skills. The nature of our economy in recent years means that they also lag behind in the access that they have to conventional employment. It is especially important to examine what can be done for more marginal communities, or for those most recently arrived. I hope that the Minister will consider that.

A number of inter-related issues influence small businesses. I am a little impatient with the view that the small business sector is monolithic; it is neither monolithic nor homogenous. Practice varies enormously within it, as all the studies indicate. The companies that we look to for growth are well defined: they are well managed, they tend to be newer and they are in an innovative sector. However, we have to be careful not to be over-enthusiastic about the small business sector. If we think, "Small business good, everything else not so good", a number of things will follow. First, we will ignore the real problems that affect small businesses, although the Government are now addressing those problems. Secondly, we will ignore the fact that outrageous practices exist among small businesses, which we must also address.

This country still lags behind in business innovation. That is not primarily a problem of small businesses. If we compare the best firms with the worst firms, however, we find that training costs range from £294 per employee per annum down to £34 per employee per annum. Sadly, the bulk of those at the top are larger firms and more innovatory companies, while smaller firms tend to be heavily clustered among those at the bottom. The failure of small firms to invest in training and innovation must be addressed. A big gap exists, so we should not be starry-eyed.

I recently had an opportunity to see how exporters operated, and was struck by the relative dearth of small British firms. Compared with German exporters, for example, British small firms are significantly under-represented. The Small Business Service has a significant role to play in export promotion, and in working with the DTI and the whole Government system to encourage small firms to be more export oriented.

We should also recognise that the management of small firms varies enormously. Some are well managed and dynamic, and look to growth. Some, however, will never grow and do not seek to grow, which we should also accept. We do not look to the sole trader to be the engine of growth. However, some firms, which are not well managed and do not look for anything more than stagnation, are grossly underperforming. That management issue should be addressed, because it has consequences for innovation and investment. It also has consequences for regulation, which I shall discuss in a moment. The Small Business Service should encourage dynamic management attitudes and the strategic management of firms.

I am extremely impatient with the rosy view that regulation is bad and deregulation is good. That is nonsense; it has no basis in common sense or economic efficiency. When small firms are asked whether they want to play on a level playing field or whether they want to compete with firms who are engaged in the most dodgy, outrageous practices, time after time good firms say that they want regulation that works. I shall give examples of unacceptable practices by small firms, which I hope the Opposition will join me in condemning. They are practices that have no place in modern society.

Mrs. Browning: I echo the hon. Gentleman's emphasis on the need for a level playing field. When the Employment Rights (Dispute Resolution) Bill went through the House, Conservative Members tabled an amendment to the effect that companies employing fewer than 50 people should be exempt from the legislation. That would have brought the regulations into line with those governing European companies, so that United Kingdom companies would not have been placed at a competitive disadvantage to those in mainland Europe. However, the Government rejected the amendment and set the level at 20 people rather than 50.

Is the hon. Gentleman worried that there is now no level playing field because the Government refused to accept a principle that we thought fair—that UK companies should work on the same basis as European Union companies?

Mr. Lloyd: At least one part of the hon. Lady's argument is simply wrong. All the evidence suggests that

[Mr. Lloyd]

the United Kingdom does not have an over-regulated economy. The Minister referred to the OECD report, which makes it clear that, when measured against a comparable group of international traders in modern, efficient economies, Britain is at the bottom of the regulatory pile. That was an extensive study by the OECD, and we must take it on board in saying that Britain is not over-regulated.

There is always a problem with cut-off points for small firms. A firm employing 25 people is more likely to compete with a firm employing 15 than with a firm employing 10,000. These limits are extremely arbitrary. Moreover, a firm that would have been described as a small firm at the time of the Bolton report, a long time ago, employed considerably more people than a small firm does today. The definition of the term "small firm" has changed.

I shall cite the example of a shop in the north-west of England, in which four workers are employed. An employee who started work in June 1999 asked for, and was refused, paid holiday and was told that entitlement to paid holidays would begin only after 12 months' employment. The shop refused to allow its staff a meal break in an eight-and-a-half hour working day, although that is illegal. When the employee asked for a payslip, she was told merely that everything was in order. That is an example of a bad employer who is breaking the law and needs regulation.

Let us take the further example of a firm employing a 20-year-old. Instead of paying her £3 an hour to which she is entitled under the minimum wage legislation, it has dropped her wage to £2 an hour. I wonder whether the Opposition spokesperson can justify paying a 20-year-old £2 an hour as an acceptable living wage in today's world. I certainly cannot. When challenged about why he had not issued that employee with a payslip, the employer told her that it was because he could not afford to employ an accountant.

Those are examples of atrocious employers who need regulation. I make no apology for saying that I am convinced of the reasons why I am a member of the party of government, rather than the party of opposition, when I hear the arrant nonsense that regulation is bad and deregulation is automatically good. That describes not the better regulation that the Government want to introduce, but the deregulation that the Opposition favour. I am also convinced that the people of this country will continue to vote for the party of Government and not for the Opposition.

Mrs. Browning: A balance must be struck. If one is keen on deregulation, or a light touch of regulation, that does not mean that one is a total free marketeer. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, during the previous Parliament, I tabled an amendment to a Conservative Bill that gave part-time workers the right to a payslip?

Mr. Lloyd: I congratulate the hon. Lady.

Mrs. Browning: Now you do.

Mr. Lloyd: I congratulate the hon. Lady on that. It is remarkable, however, that it took her own efforts to persuade the previous Government to introduce legislation whose importance is so obvious to all of us. Perhaps that explains why she is a little confused. She is a natural regulator who is now in the ideological trap of the Opposition and is having to work hard to justify her own unsupportable position.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Not only my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton but members of the previous Conservative Government should be appalled by the hon. Gentleman's comments on their efforts to tighten health and safety regulation. How does he reconcile Conservative Members' actions in that regard with his statement that they are against regulation?

Mr. Lloyd: I am happy to debate health and safety at any time. Under the previous Government, this country experienced a deteriorating health and safety record and the erosion of regulation. That especially affected small firms, whose employees are extremely vulnerable to a lack of regulation. Without health and safety inspectors, small and large firms did not perceive any pressure to maintain their health and safety records. More people in small and large firms continued to die under the previous Government because they ignored health and safety and underfunded the Health and Safety Executive. Labour Members do not need any lessons about that.

This is an important debate. We need to examine the role of small firms and how we can make them more dynamic. The Government are doing many of the right things, but I appeal to my hon. Friend the Minister: we must get away from a culture of saying that small firms are automatically dynamic and good when not all of them are dynamic and some are awful. In particular, we must get away from the idea that small firms are entitled for those reasons to plead for deregulation in all circumstances. We want better regulation and a bonfire of irrelevant regulation. We also want regulation that strikes a fair balance between the rights of employees, customers and other stakeholders and those of employers. My plea is that we should never lose sight of the fact that the Government must create that central balance. If we take the nonsensical view that regulation is bad and that deregulation is good, we do so at the expense of millions of our fellow citizens—not only employees but customers and other stakeholders—who will not thank us.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Mr. Leigh—I am sorry, I mean Mr. Chope.

4.13 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): That reminds me of when I joined the House and was mistaken for my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) by a colleague who wanted to give me a drink and lobby me to vote for him for chairmanship of a Select Committee. As a new boy, I accepted the drink and said that I did not think that hon. Members who were not Select Committee members had votes on their chairmanship. My colleague then asked, "Who are you?" I was immediately forced to abandon my drink, and he rushed off to lobby the correct person. You are therefore not alone, Madam Deputy Speaker, in having muddled me up with another hon. Member.

It is a great pleasure to participate in the debate. Having served on the Health and Safety Commission during much of the previous parliamentary Session, I should tell the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) that his remarks about health and safety are far removed from the facts. I shall not go into the matter in detail, but I remind hon. Members that the health and safety record was improving as a result of the previous Government's policies.

I am also suspicious about the suggestion of the hon. Member for Manchester, Central that we should not go overboard in supporting small businesses. His remarks chimed conveniently with comments made by the Trades Union Congress in a letter discussed in the Trade and Industry Committee earlier this week. The letter stated:

"It is also questionable that small firms should have extra incentives simply by virtue of being small or because more small firms in the economy is automatically a good thing...the role of small firms in improving productivity growth, enterprise and innovation does not sit easily with the facts...In order to significantly raise national productivity and investment rates, it is the behaviour of the corporate and public sectors that is key."

That is the traditional view of the Labour party. It is obviously the view of the Trades Union Congress, which is concerned that more than half the people who work in this country are employed by small firms employing fewer than 100 people. I suspect that one reason why there has been so much delay in the Government's introduction of a substantive programme of assistance for small firms is that they were interested in window dressing, propaganda and seductive words before the general election. They found, when they got in, that the TUC and others—the big battalions, the corporate side and the public sector—were lobbying strongly against the interests of small firms and as a result they thought that the best thing would be to go slow on the matter. Thus, there was no proper debate last year, and this year's debate is being curtailed. It will be three hours rather than the five hours that the Government promised would be the norm every year during their tenure of office.

On the theme of actions speaking louder than words, and to illustrate the Government's indifference to the problem faced by a small firm in my constituency, I shall explain what happened to Coulton Instrumentation, of Christchurch, which wanted to export valves to another country. A representative of the firm telephoned the Department of Trade and Industry on 2 February 1999. He asked for the department responsible for exports to Iran, and was put through to someone on the middle eastern trade desk. He explained that the company was quoting for a project in Iran and needed advice, as it had never supplied Iran before. He described the goods involved and gave the name of the firm's customer to the gentleman on the DTI desk, who telephoned the same day and advised that the customer was known to the DTI and that there would be no problem in securing payment. The firm asked whether any special documentation was required for Iran and was told no. It was encouraged to go ahead and proceed with the business.

The firm was under the impression that it had received the complete picture and that the person to whom its representative had spoken was able to speak on behalf of the Iranian desk. It became clear after the firm had produced the goods and was in the process of exporting them that it was wrong to have accepted the information from the DTI at face value. On 12 August Customs and Excise at Heathrow stopped the control valves from going on the flight to Iran and wrote requesting further technical information. The firm telefaxed copies of the information requested by return and a few days later chased Heathrow customs to find out what was happening. A representative spoke to Mr. McFarland from the Customs and Excise export enforcement team and explained that the firm had contacted the Department of Trade and industry about the matter and had not been given any special instructions. His words were:

"If you go to the DTI Iran trade desk they will encourage you to export. But if you go to DTI export control, they will do their best to stop you. That is a very silly situation."

He said that the firm forwarded the documents to the DTI. On 19 August, the firm chased Heathrow customs again and was advised that it could be up to two weeks before it received a reply from the DTI. On 24 August, it received a letter from customs stating that the DTI had decided to request an export licence application. That was the first time that that small firm, which had not exported to Iran before, had heard that it needed to obtain an export licence. The matter did not end there. Even at that stage, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Government could not get their tackle in order to enable the export to proceed. After the firm contacted the DTI helpline to request an application form, it received information on how to apply, but no form. It repeated its request for an application form, which arrived on a computer disk.

The firm wrote to Iran to obtain the necessary end user's undertaking, which it had to telefax to the DTI for confirmation that the form had been completed correctly because the instructions were ambiguous. Ambiguity is a major burden on small business. The firm telephoned the DTI three times in one day for a response to the telefax. The last call was transferred to four different people. No one could help. It was eventually referred to the supplementary notes in the standard application form. By 20 September, some 11 days after the firm first asked for the information, no reply had been received and it had no alternative but to assume that the end user's undertaking had been completed correctly. The application form was then sent to the DTI with a covering letter explaining that the firm was short of time because its letter of credit was due to expire in three weeks. It asked for assistance in processing the application.

The DTI wrote back the following day confirming receipt of the document and allocating a reference number to the export licence application. Some 10 days later, the firm called the DTI to find out how the application was progressing. It was told that it would take between 10 and 20 days to process. The individual to whom the application had been allocated said that licence processing was a sensitive political issue and that other Departments had to give their approval. She advised that the application was booked to go to an interdepartmental committee meeting on 12 October. As the delay was being caused by three Government Departments and 12 October ws a long way away, the managing director of the small firm wrote directly to the Prime Minister and copied the letter to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. He described the efforts

[Mr. Christopher Chope]

that had been made over many years to produce exports for Britain and appealed for intervention in this problem. The firm also wrote to its customer and requested an extension of the letter of credit. It was told over the telephone that all other European and American-owned suppliers to the project had made delivery on time without export control problems. It is a major issue that our firms are burdened with controls that their competitors do not have.

On 12 October, the firm contacted Mr. Peter Reed of Dorset business link. The hon. Member for Manchester, Central said that we need to get business links or the Small Business Service involved in helping small firms to export. I hope he listens carefully to what happened. Dorset business link spoke to Jayne Carpenter, the head of licensing at DTI export control, who was aware of the letter that had been sent to the Prime Minister. She advised that the application had to go before the interdepartmental committee and that the delay was outside her control. It is not much use having a small firms service that can intervene at the highest level of Government to remove red tape and bureaucracy and enable goods to be exported if the head of the relevant Department cannot assist.

On 13 October, the firm received a reply made on the Prime Minister's behalf by Mr. Coupland, the correspondence secretary at No. 10. He advised that the letter had been passed to the Department of Trade and Industry and that it would send back any comments direct. Fortunately, the firm received from its customer an extension of its letter of credit. On 14 October, it telefaxed the Department of Trade and Industry person allocated to deal with its application, to find out whether a decision had been made on the meeting that occurred on 12 October and whether an export licence had been granted. It was told in response that its licence had not been considered in that meeting but that another meeting was scheduled for 18 October.

On 15 October, the firm telefaxed the head of export licensing and asked for help to shorten the delay. She telefaxed back by return, apologising for the conflicting information and stating that although she was unable to give a definite time scale she thought that it would take roughly a further six to eight weeks for the application to be processed. She explained that the application had to be considered by an interdepartmental committee consisting of representatives from the Department of Trade and Industry, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence.

In desperation, the firm sent another telefax to the Prime Minister explaining that the problems had increased since it had last written. It said that in its opinion the Department of Trade and Industry was unable to meet its obligations to exporting companies and asked again for the Prime Minister's personal intervention. By that time, the House had returned from the summer recess. I tabled four parliamentary questions to the Department of Trade and Industry about the licence application, and it is a fair summary to say that I received completely inconclusive replies. I emphasised in the questions that the issue had been drawn to the attention of the Ministers concerned and that I hoped that we would be able to resolve the problem and ensure that the export could be carried to a successful conclusion.

The firm was then told that it would take much longer for the application to be dealt with and that it should obtain yet another extension to its letter of credit. Having obtained an extension to 15 November, the firm was informed that the application would not be dealt with until between 1 and 15 December. It then obtained a further extension. You will not be surprised to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the licence application was not dealt with by that time, which meant that by Christmas the company had still not received a yes or no to its application. The firm is keen to increase its export business—

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Still?

Mr. Chope: The hon. Gentleman asks whether it is still interested, but I shall tell him what has happened now. It is now four months since the application was accepted for processing by the Department of Trade and Industry. Mr. Coulton, the managing director of the firm, wrote to me on 11 January. His letter states:

"Words will not begin to express my feeling of absolute frustration. This application has been the subject of four parliamentary questions, two letters to the Prime Minister and a letter to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, yet no one can advise when a decision will be made".

Unfortunately, the decision was made by his customer, who decided to cancel the order for the shipment of control valves, which was afterwards placed with a company in Germany. Mr Coulton wrote to Customs and Excise, which had been holding the goods since its intervention in August, stating that he would arrange for the valves to be collected and returned for disposal.

That is the reality of how joined-up government is treating small entrepreneurs eager to export and to back Britain. It is absolutely disgraceful that people write to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry but receive no adequate response. I hope that the Minister will apologise unreservedly to the firm and ensure that it receives compensation for its ordeal. I hope that she will ensure that the systems are changed within Government so that timely decisions are taken on export applications. If ever there was a deterrent to small businesses trying to build export trade, that experience is surely an example of it.

I can regale the Chamber with another example from my constituency, of a different firm involved in selling replacement parts for aircraft. Some very large operators are engaged in that business; they can get an export licence from the Government that covers a range of products so that they do not have to make a licence-by-licence application. The firm in my constituency is too small to qualify for such a licence so it has to make applications to the Government case by case for permission to supply spares to aircraft in countries such as Pakistan and India.

The firm is at a disadvantage because other, larger firms can export on the basis of a list approved in advance. If the Government were interested in helping small businesses and creating a level playing field, one might expect that in return that firm would be able to get timely consideration of its applications, but it cannot.

The company keeps phoning me and telling me about its frustrations. It asks, "How can we possibly build a niche export business to provide spare aircraft parts if we do not get at least some assistance from the Government and the Department of Trade and Industry?"

I have given two examples of the Government seriously letting down small businesses in my constituency. My third example is of a completely different kind of small business: a doctor who runs a small general practice in West Moors. He wrote to me recently stating:

"The Department of Health has just issued yet another version of the NHS prescription form FP10."

The letter goes on to say:

"This is the third version we have had in the past year. The previous style was in use for 20 years or more. In the past we have at least been able to use up the old stock before switching to the new ones, but on this occasion we have been told to return the old stocks to the health authority for destruction. We have sent back a considerable number of boxes, several months supply."

The doctor wanted to be able to use the old forms. He suggested to the Department that supplies of cut sheet prescription forms could be produced to allow the use of modern laser printers—they are cheaper to run, and faster and more secure than the old slow and noisy dot matrix printers. He was told by the Government, who are geared to modern technology, that funds were not available for that purpose. That general practitioner was trying to get up to date and asking for prescription forms that he could use with his modern laser printer, but it was not possible.

That is another, real, live example that shows that for all the Minister's rhetoric about how the Government will encourage new forms of commerce and e-commerce they cannot even provide forms in a way that will enable my constituent, Dr. Blackmore, to operate more efficiently.

From my constituents' experience, the Government's performance in respect of small businesses is lamentable. From the proposals for the Small Business Service and the rough document that was issued yesterday—it was stapled together in what was obviously a last-minute, desperate measure—it is clear that there is no consistency about what is meant by a small firm. The people who will serve on the Small Business Service council will be representatives of not only small but medium-sized firms, yet we know that 94.7 per cent. of all the firms in this country have fewer than 10 employees. They are effectively microbusinesses. Another 4 per cent. have between nine and 100 employees. But it seems that the small firms body that is to be set up will be run by representatives of much larger firms. There is all the difference in the world, thankfully, between a microfirm and a small firm. If the Government are committed to small businesses, there is no need for medium-sized businesses to be represented on this new, small firms organisation.

We do not even know what the budget for the organisation is. As part of what I think is a concerted delaying tactic, the Government are again saying that they will leave it to the new organisation to work out its programme and prioritites. The chairman has only just been appointed and will not be paid until next month or the month after. Another six or nine months will pass before there is a clear policy and, by then, the Government will have been in office for three and a half years. If ever a Government should be indicted for not getting down to the business, this Government should be for their attitude towards small firms. Something serious must be done about that, and I hope that we shall have another debate on small firms soon, not in a year's time, so that we can hold the Government to account. At present, they think that they can rest on their laurels and on some clever wording.

In conclusion, I remind hon. Members of the statement that was made in the so-called "Small Business Action Update" issued in June 1998, on which much reliance was placed in our previous debate on small firms. It stated:

"On 25 March, the Minister for Trade announced a new package of export support which will mainly benefit small firms".

I hope that the Minister will realise from what I have said today that, whatever that package was, it was not fit for the purpose.

4.37 pm

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I am pleased to have been called to speak in this debate. Small business and enterprise has been a particular interest of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry in the past year and, as a member of that Committee, I have taken part in hearing evidence and have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity briefly to visit the United States, where we could compare, exchange and learn from experiences in the UK and the USA. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) has covered part of what we did there.

In this small business debate we are in a position to welcome the advent of the Small Business Service, which starts in April. This is a great step forward, which I hope will be acknowledged by small businesses throughout the country as an indication of the importance that the Government attach to them.

Barclays bank estimates that there were 470,000 new business start-ups in 1999. Others have said that the small business sector is of enormous importance to the UK economy, and I agree. The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) mentioned the statistics for small businesses. The Department of Trade and Industry's statistics for small and medium-sized enterprises in the UK show that 94.4 per cent. of businesses employ fewer than 10 people and 99.6 per cent. employ fewer than 100 people.

In London in particular the growth in jobs that has been achieved in recent years has been largely in the so-called microbusiness sector, to which other hon. Members have drawn attention. The latest figures from the Federation of Small Businesses in London show a growth of 14.4 per cent. among companies employing fewer than five people between 1995 and 1997. John Emmins, who chairs the FSB in London, said on 8 December 1999:

"We have always been convinced that any future growth in London's economy will come from the microbusiness sector, typically those firms employing between one and four workers. More importantly, it is from this sector that we can expect job creation which may lead to everyone's golden scenario, namely full employment."

The prospect of that golden scenario prompted many of us to enter the House and remains a policy priority for the Government.

[Ms Linda Perham]

However, that Federation of Small Businesses report, which is based on annual employment surveys, makes less happy reading in respect of the retail sector. The revitalising of our high streets is largely dependent on the growth of small traders. We have, after all, been famously called a nation of shopkeepers. There is growth, and there is enormous potential for further growth, but consistent help of the highest quality must be provided.

My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned encouraging the involvement of women in small and medium-sized enterprises. The Select Committee was heartened by its visit to the United States last May, when we met the head of the American small business administration, Ms Alvarez, and heard about its initiatives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil said, Ms Alvarez's appointment to a Cabinet post demonstrates the importance that the USA Government place on small businesses. We also visited Sweden last month, and learned about the help that is given to Swedish women entrepreneurs.

The East London small business centre reported 255 business start-ups in the 18 months before December 1999, 42 per cent. of which are run by women. Ethnic minority businesses, which constitute an important sector in north-east London and elsewhere, as hon. Members have noted, accounted for 34 per cent.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce called for integration of the support offered to small businesses, and a drawing together of the different strands of provision that are funded by the Department of Trade and Industry, the European Union, the single regeneration budget, chambers of commerce and local government. Indeed, the Federation of Small Businesses has called for some time for a one-stop shop or single gateway for small businesses. The list of topics that need to be addressed is long, and includes credit, export advice, employment legislation, health and safety, value added tax, other taxation and insurance arrangements, benefits, national non-domestic rates and utilities. Bringing all relevant expertise under one roof will be difficult, but that is what the SBS—and, of course, small businesses—must try to do.

The need for integration will be quickly and specifically highlighted by the development of plans to spend funding achieved through European objective 2 status. Those areas that are granted such status will benefit fully from funding only if they enmesh their plans with those of other agencies and funding streams. The role of small businesses will not be maximised unless they are brought into the planning stage. In London, the detailed plan for objective 2—the programme complement document—must be ready by the end of the year.

Steps have also been taken in London to achieve a single franchise for the SBS. That has not been an easy task. The Government office for London has had to contact about 170 interested organisations, some 87 of which are business links partnerships. During the process that the Government office for London endorsed, Lord Sawyer was drafted in to chair the meetings. His brief included being able to

"flush out hidden agendas and hold the ring",

which sounds like a cross between Dyno-Rod and Lennox Lewis. Hon. Members will note that I was careful to mention a British boxer.

I stated my commitment to the concept of business links partnerships during a debate in the House on 19 June 1998. Indeed, last year, in my own constituency, Business Links London East received a nationwide best practice accolade for providing a business support service that helped local business to improve turnover and profits.

Notwithstanding the general benefits of integration and partnership to which I have referred, I hope that the vital role of local government in supporting small businesses is given the recognition that it deserves. Councils are key providers of services such as planning, environmental health, licensing, car parking, town centre management and waste collection. Legislation will shortly impose on councils a statutory duty to develop local economies.

The importance of the contribution of local councils to economic development has never been greater. If the SBS is to achieve the success that we all wish for, it must obtain and maintain the best possible links with local government. In turn, local government will be failing itself and its supporters if it does not recognise the benefits of establishing a close relationship with the SBS at the appropriate level. It is inconceivable that any council's local economic strategy can be realisitic if it does not stress the importance of small and medium-sized enterprise.

We must tackle the integration of the regional development agencies. RDAs are being heralded in some quarters as the most dramatic development for UK businesses in many decades. If that is to be so, there must be a clear understanding of what is best done by the RDAs and where the SBS should concentrate its inevitably limited resources. In London, those questions will need to be addressed when the London development agency is up and running and the Greater London Authority and the Mayor are giving it the democratic guidance that it will require.

I have some queries about the SBS. Who will propose and approve its performance indicators? As the years go by, we shall need to know whether it is as successful as we hope and expect that it is going to be.

The SBS's remit is to help firms comprising up to 250 people. I am worried that too much emphasis may be placed on the higher end of the scale, thereby diluting the help that might otherwise be concentrated on the smaller firms. However, I have been somewhat reassured by the Minister's opening remarks, by the Government's reply to the Select Committee report—which recognises the need to develop a differentiated approach in supplying advice and services across the range—and by the announcement on 20 September 1999 of the Business Volunteers Mentoring Association to help start-up firms.

The SBS may have the specific expertise to assist co-operatives. If new mutualism is to be the exciting development that some have said that it will be, the SBS

could act as a catalyst for the development of co-operative enterprises. However, it will need to have the relevant experience and skills if it is to do so.

My last two queries are about the level of funding of the SBS—especially given that it is not to have the payroll service—and whether the chief executive will be free to publish his views on regulatory legislation, particularly where he considers that small businesses' concerns have not been addressed.

I conclude by drawing hon. Members' attention to the excellent work that the Government have undertaken in encouraging small businesses. The tax regime has been improved by the new 10p rate of corporation tax and £20 million has been invested in venture capital to finance high technology businesses in their early stages. The great injustice of late payment, which is a real problem for small businesses, has been tackled. The SBS is clearly another major step in the right direction. All that good work means that a thriving small business sector will play a substantial part in the continuing success story that is the British economy under a Labour Government.

4.48 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): It gives me great pleasure to speak in a debate on small business, as the chairman of a small business and someone who has been involved in the sector for 10 years. During that time, I had the experience of a company that hit the rocks, although I am glad to say that on that occasion nobody was hurt.

At one point, I had close contact with clothing manufacturers in Wales. Hon. Members who tell us about the effects of the national minimum wage should be aware that the minimum wage has lost the Welsh clothing industry thousands of jobs. Thousands of people have gone from low pay to no pay. Much as we want to see a high wage, high performance economy, the proper route to achieving that is through investment and the development of the real economy, rather than artificial measures that, unfortunately, often do far more harm than good.

E-commerce, will have an important impact on the small business sector. My hon. Friends and I regret the fact that Labour Members have no stomach for a fight and that the Minister and her colleagues preferred to give their hundreds of Labour Back Benchers an early night—none of them is here today—than to put yesterday's business through in the time available, so that we could have discussed the Electronic Communications Bill on the Floor of the House today. That is what happened during the past 24 hours and the many millions of people who want early implementation of the Bill will be disappointed that the Government gave it so little consideration when determining the business of the House this week. We know from the Second Reading debate on that Bill that the Government do not understand the importance of the sector. I am thinking of IR35 and the effect that the new tax rules will have on small businesses and information technology providers generally—there are many in my constituency—who were accused by the Minister in the House a few weeks ago of being tax dodgers.

It would be helpful if the Minister would clarify whether she believes that every small business man who takes legitimate steps to avoid taxation is behaving in the same way as people who illegally evade taxation. Does she consider those two actions as one and the same? If so, and if her Government intend to portray tax avoidance as illegal tax evasion, the framework within which small businesses must operate in this country will be so discouraging and difficult that many will give up entirely. People in the IT industry can often choose in which jurisdiction to operate and will decide to operate elsewhere. The Government's aspiration to gain the lion's share of e-commerce trade for the United Kingdom will remain merely that—an aspiration.

Related to that problem is that of the temp-to-perm regulations, which we await with great interest. I know from small firms in my constituency that many people believe that the Government do not understand the need in a flexible economy for the easy hiring and engagement of temporay employees or the value to businesses of being able to translate them into long-term employees without the sort of penalties which the Government initially contemplated with their original temp-to-perm regulations and which many fear will still come about when we see the full details shortly.

To put the matter in context, I have been advised by local firms that the cost of employing outside contractors to undertake IT work for a small business will rise by 25 per cent. on an hourly basis as a result of the implementation of IR35 and the expected temp-to-perm regulations. How can small businesses invest in new technology—we all agree that they must do so—when the Government are increasing their costs by 25 per cent. per hour? The Government are imposing that appalling burden on small businesses as we speak.

Mr. O'Neill: I am a wee bit at a loss. If I choose to employ a plumber, I like to think that he is paying his tax, which is reflected in the bill that I pay. Why should people in the IT business be different from the plumbers I employ to fix the sink in my house? Why should one group of workers be subsidised by the rest of us because of a loophole in the tax system, which the Government are now choosing to fill?

Mr. St. Aubyn: I am sure that every IT contractor would be delighted to be treated as a self-employed business man, as is the hon. Gentleman's local plumber. The problem is that self-employed IT workers are treated more like employees than like the local plumber. Although they are employed to fix problems in the system, they are not allowed to charge on the same basis as local plumbers. That explains why costs are going up and why the best and most able IT people, who use the current rules to accumulate capital to invest in their business and to employ more people, will leave our shores and find a better environment, such as that on the other side of the Atlantic, where their skills will be better appreciated. If that happens—there is every sign that it may—it will be the best rather than the majority of IT workers who will leave, although the others will suffer as a consequence.

I am deeply concerned about the cost of access to the internet. We heard earlier about how the gainsaying of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry persuaded British Telecom to move a small distance in the right direction. I am reliably informed that the current estimates are that British Telecom's windfall profits from IT connections are in the order of half a billion

[Mr. St. Aubyn]

pounds a year. Another consequence of the IT revolution is that British Telecom's revenue from international traffic is probably much lower than it expected for the same period. However, a strategic issue is involved that goes beyond the interests of a monopolistic—or, as the hon. Member for Ochil pointed out, perhaps I should say oligopolistic—supplier. If businesses are to be connected to the net as quickly and effectively as their counterparts in other countries, those costs must be reduced dramatically. British Telecom's high connection charges have held up development, which has had on-going, long-term costs to our economy. That is a more important consideration than the individual interests of a firm, although those interests still deserve to be considered. The Government had an opportunity to deal with that issue in part III of the Electronic Communications Bill but they failed to do so, and that failure will return to haunt them. Britain has a golden opportunity to become the major player in Europe in the world of e-commerce, but the Government are losing that opportunity through their lethargy and inaction, and their failure to grasp the real and difficult issues that are involved.

I am aware that many other hon. Members want to speak so I shall conclude by making one more point. The changes that e-commerce involves are not encouraging for many small businesses. In the long run, the portals to commerce that the new framework will produce and the way in which distribution will be conducted mean that a small number of e-commerce companies will control the gateway to customers. It will be hard for many small businesses to get through that gateway at a price that gives them a decent return. If they are to do so, they must be allowed to have access to the new technology and to get on top of it as fast as they can. The Government failed to give them that opportunity because they failed to tackle the problems that I raised. Their failure will impoverish small businesses in this country.

4.58 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I shall not respond to the doom and gloom that we have heard from the Tory Benches this afternoon. I want to bring optimism and light into this Chamber. I have much to say but, in view of the time, I shall try to be brief. I shall say a few words on the needs and aspirations of small firms in my constituency and explain how the Government's policies are helping them grow and prosper.

Only last week I was privileged to open the new premises of a small firm called TAS Fleet Trainers. It was started by one of my constituents, Lyn Treadgold, who spent a decade and a half working for others—and for herself—as a driving instructor before she realised that her talents could be used more laterally. The growth of two and three-car families means that there is a need for more driving instructors. Tighter insurance requirements and a tougher driving test, with a written exam built in, meant better driving instructors. Because of changes in the structure of daily work, more people are becoming more mobile in their working day. The growth in personal service industries has resulted in more people on the road, and more people meeting and working with other people in their homes, offices and workshops. However, the sheer growth of such mileage can have a down side. I read recently that 25 per cent. of all road accidents involve people driving as part of their work routine. That figure hides personal misery and linked insurance premiums and overheads.

Lyn Treadgold's idea was to combine her talents as an advanced training instructor with the needs of local companies for advanced fleet driving trainers. That training combined elements of advanced driver training with defensive car driving techniques, which cut down on road accidents and improved the overall quality of open road driving. Therefore, the road became a safer place for the general public and firms were helped to avoid pain and cost. Most importantly, it helped to keep people alive.

Lyn Treadgold's idea meant setting up her own business and employing other driving instructors. Local agencies in my area helped that idea become a reality. Tees Valley business link helped her with the initial business plan and her cost projections, employment services helped her find the right people to employ, and Redcar and Cleveland borough council, which is in my constituency, helped by providing premises in a small, easy-in easy-out business centre. The centre is based on a conversion of the old Redcar railway station, and the station offices, booking hall and concourse have been converted into a large number of individual units. The borough council also employs a centre manager and staff, who act as the front desk for the tenant. Lyn Treadgold was therefore helped by a government agency, a local business support system and a local authority. Those agencies, which worked in partnership with the banks, and, of course, Lyn Treadgold herself, turned this bright idea into reality.

I am sure that such stories are replicated all over the country, as older industrial structures based on large employers and mass production techniques change to a structure based on small firm creation, management buy-outs and spin-offs. Those structural changes have a big impact on areas such as Teesside, where heavy industry has been combined with developing technology. Our chemical industry is changing from being a big bulk producer dominated by a small number of world-class firms to one where smaller batch production of higher value-added products is becoming the norm. Our engineering industry once specialised in large fabrication for the old, heavy, iron and steel and shipbuilding industries, and has had to adapt historical in-built skills to cater for the new precise instrumentation needs of a steel industry that now competes on quality rather than quantity. Our offshore engineering sector is undergoing structural decline as the depletion of the North sea reserve gathers pace, but it has pioneered advanced undersea engineering techniques.

The workers in those industries still have those skills in their brains. Many of them are looking to apply them in newer, more advanced manufacturing techniques. Many of them are looking to sell their skills and ability through self-employment or starting their own firms. Society can also utilise many of those skills. For example, as a result of climate change, a large part of the UK and many parts of the developing world need new forms of flood defences and new techniques for marine management. The subsea engineering techniques

developed by the Teesside offshore industry could be developed and adapted to help those regions and countries. I am sure that there are many other examples.

The Government's programme for small firm support will help those dreams to become a reality. I am particularly excited that much technically innovative work is being helped through by the expansion of the DTI's innovation budget. Locally, small firms and agencies, such as the Middlesbrough-based CAD/CAM centre, and high-technology centres, such as Cleveland Innovation, are making full use of the opportunities offered by this expansion, which they match with specialist European Commission funds to provide a comprehensive package of support for local companies and budding new Teesside innovators.

Such agencies can network with other local business centres to ensure that technical innovation goes hand in hand with the development of high-quality training and retraining facilities, and with bodies such as the local branch of business links, so that financial advice, mentoring and business plan development can be offered under one roof. Local authorities can also help through the provision of specialist accommodation, such as the Redcar business centre that I mentioned earlier, with direct finance through loans, grants or loan guarantees and with help in finding a way through the licensing or planning maze. The Government's plans to consolidate this by setting up a comprehensive Small Business Service based on the business links network must be welcomed.

I give a warm welcome to all the policy initiatives that the Government are adopting to help small businesses and their trading needs.

5.6 pm

Mr. Kerry Pollard (St. Albans): As chairman of the all-party small business group and from running my own microbusiness before I came to the House, which began with two employees and went up to 25 within four years, with a corresponding increase in throughput, I know how the small business sector operates and what it needs. I can remember hoovering up before I went home at night and putting the milk bottles out.

The small business sector is vital to the success of the British economy, with 38 million small businesses representing 55 per cent. of private sector employment and 45 per cent. of gross domestic product. Those figures highlight the importance of small businesses to our economic future as the engines of job creation and growth.

I am delighted that the Prime Minister recognised the importance of the sector by changing the ministerial post from Under-Secretary to full Minister of State. We are indeed fortunate to have such a high-calibre Minister in my hon. Friend. The small business sector also has friends in high places, with Ministers in the Treasury and the Department for Education and Employment who were former small business Ministers. The Government recently appointed David Irwin to head up the new Small Business Service, and I was pleased to hear his pledge to tackle the problem of red tape for small businesses as a matter of urgency.

The Government have introduced new employment legislation to create greater fairness at work, including the minimum wage, the working hours directive and the working families tax credit, but the cumulative effect of the deluge of new regulations is a matter of concern, with the full onus of compliance on the small business owner. In small firms with only a few workers, resources are taken away from the main task of making money to concentrate on employment and other legislation. The higher administrative burden for small businesses, particularly as compared with bigger businesses, adds greatly to the cost of compliance. I am therefore gratified that red tape is high on the new SBS agenda and that it will act as a single gateway for small firms, to ensure easy access to Government services.

The Government are firmly committed to stimulating the creation, competitiveness and growth of new and small business. The European awards for the spirit of enterprise have just been launched by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe. Through that initiative, small and medium-sized enterprises can gain wider recognition and business exposure. The awards, which are backed in the UK by the DTI and across Europe by the European Commission, are made at regional, national and European level, giving us an opportunity to acknowledge new and developing businesses and encourage entrepreneurs. This year is the first time that the awards will be held in the UK, although they have been running in other European member states since 1991.

In my constituency, businesses are almost exclusively small and medium-sized, with many fine examples of enterprise and the growth of e-commerce. One example is Hocking NDT, a high-tech business that exports worldwide, which was started some years ago by Don Hocking from a shed in his garden. It now employs high-calibre people and is an important part of our local and regional economy. There are many similar companies.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Is he still in the shed?

Mr. Pollard: He has moved on to two sheds.

The all-party small business group with responsibility for furthering the interests of and providing feedback on small business in Parliament maintains close links with small business organisations such as the Forum of Private Business, the Federation of Small Businesses, which represents more than 180,000 independently owned small businesses throughout the United Kingdom, the Small Business Bureau, and the associations of chartered and certified accountants. Those groups have provided a great deal of relevant reserch that is useful to the Government in conjunction with the direct feedback that they receive from their small business members. They will want to work closely with the new SBS to co-ordinate further the support for the sector. All those groups are putting names forward for the council that will manage the SBS, contrary to what has been said.

In addition to the increased administrative burden and costs of compliance that are associated with red tape, a key problem for the small business sector is that of easier access to finance. Evaluation of the Government's small firms loan guarantee scheme is taking place with lenders. Furthermore, although I welcome the new 10p corporation tax rate for small

[Mr. Pollard]

companies and the extension of the 40 per cent. capital allowance for small and medium-sized enterprises to encourage investment and growth, I endorse the view that small businesses should be encouraged to retain cash in the business, perhaps by reducing tax rates on profits that are returned to it. I look forward to seeing further improvements in those measures to assist the small business sector.

Madam Deputy Speaker: May I say that several hon. Members have made extensive use of copious notes? They know that the reading of speeches is not permitted, which I am sure they will bear in mind. I recognise that the use of notes is acceptable and prompts other than electronic reminders sometimes have to be used when an hon. Member makes a contribution. Does Mrs. Browning want to speak again?

Mrs. Browning: I do, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Two clear messages have come out of the debate. First, we can all flag up, with great pride and pleasure, successful businesses, especially smaller businesses, that are in our constituencies. Secondly, although we had a flourishing small business sector—the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) commented that we are known internationally as a low-regulation country—that did not happen by accident. We have that reputation because in the years of Conservative stewardship, we had specific policies that were aimed at creating a low-regulation country. We saw the definite advantages of that for the business sector and the overall growth of our national economy.

However, almost every business that I talk to mentions the cumulative effect of two years of relentless regulation. We hear the same cry from a range of businesses. Businesses from all sectors, large or small businesses, the Confederation of British Industry and organisations that represent smaller firms all send the same message: regulation is at the top of their list of concerns and they want the Government off their backs.

We heard a great deal about another Government task force that is determined to tackle regulation. I challenge the Minister on that. Our debate has rightly focused on the burden of regulation that is placed on small businesses. Week after week, the Opposition face another regulation that the Government want to add to the burden. Only last week, I prayed against the Minister's regulation to introduce statutory works councils at a cost to business of £850 million. In opposition, we must pray against regulations to bring to the House an open debate about the damage that the Government are doing.

From the contributions, especially from those of Ministers and other Government Members, it is clear that there is an ideological divide. We are pilloried for supporting deregulation. I am sorry to pick on the hon. Member for Manchester, Central, but what he said was pertinent. I gave him a clear example from the passage of what became the Employment Relations Act 1999. The Conservative party tabled an amendment to exempt from a regulation companies of fewer than 50 employees because companies of that size had such an exemption under equivalent European legislation. The Government opposed the amendment and made our companies reduce the ceiling to 20 employees.

The Government talk about the level playing field, but what is that if, when we compete with German, Italian or French companies, we find that we must work to different rules and that the Government deem it appropriate to handicap them further?

Mr. McWalter: Will the hon. Lady try to resist treating trade unions as if they are an encumbrance to business? Whatever the size of a business, good relations between trade unions and management are of real benefit, helping to secure improvements in health and safety, better conditions and a happier work force.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions must be brief.

Mrs. Browning: I shall resist doing what the hon. Gentleman referred to because there has been a clear change in the relationship between the trade unions and companies. That has arisen because of the trade union reforms under the Conservative Government of the 1980s, by which power was returned to trade union members.

Good communications between management and work force, whether via a trade union or not, do not require statutory works councils with their attendant costs. Those of us who, like me, worked in British manufacturing in the 1970s and early 1980s—I then proceeded to run my own business for 10 years—knew that there had been a sea change. That change was necessary both for the work force and for the management—I could be critical of managerial practices from the early 1980s. Much of the Government's action to put affairs on a statutory basis has been unnecessary.

The Government will be judged by their actions, not by their words. I have heard nothing to make me think that there will be fewer regulations for me to pray against or that the pound cost burden on business will lighten. I assure people that the Conservative party will put right the Government's failures when we come to office.

5.17 pm

Ms Hewitt: May I begin by asking for your assistance, Madam Deputy Speaker, with an intervention with the authorities of the House? We have had blessedly little hot air during the debate, but it would have been nicer had more heat come from the radiators in the Chamber.

Even in freezing temperatures, we have had an extremely interesting and valuable debate. I was impressed especially by the thoughtful and well-informed contribution of my hon. Friends the Members for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill), for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), for Ilford, North (Ms Perham), for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) and for St. Albans (Mr. Pollard).

I should respond to the case of Coulton Instrumentation, raised by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope). Of course, I apologise to

Mr. Coulton—he did not get the service that he should have had. Such problems happen even in the best-run businesses and Governments.

Mr. Chope: The problem is not that he failed once to get a service but that he was told repeatedly that he would get a service that was never delivered.

Ms Hewitt: I completely understand—the hon. Gentleman could hardly have made the point clearer. I shall personally get a report on what happened in the case and the reason for the delays.

I did not have time to mention British Trade International, a joint venture of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign Office. It will put together all our export development and export support work and information about potential markets. It is already doing excellent work to support small businesses that want to move into new markets and is planning to put on line export control data for countries such as Iran, where restrictions are in place. I shall find out whether that information can be put on line even more quickly to ensure that businesses and people advising them have access to the most accurate and up-to-date information available.

I urge hon. Members who have constituents with urgent business problems of the sort under discussion not to waste time and to bring their problem to me. I do not promise that I can always provide a solution, but I promise that I shall try and that I will learn the lessons from such problems to try to ensure that the service is better in future.

Mr. Chope: What more should a constituent do than write directly to the Prime Minister, who promised that he was making contact with his own Government? I, too, took up the matter on the telephone, and spoke to a Mrs. Carpenter, although I was not going to mention that. I hope that the Minister is not suggesting that my constituent was at fault.

Ms Hewitt: Of course I am not, but as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is so exceptionally popular he receives an exceptional number of letters. It is therefore difficult to obtain fast replies, especially on complex problems. I am saying simply that if hon. Members speak directly to me or to one of my colleagues in the Department, we will try to sort out their problems quickly, which is what Mr. Coulton and others in his position needed.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) spoke about deregulation and suggested that the Government were not doing enough. She will not mind if I remind her of her words. She said that as a Minister in the previous Government she would be the first to say that they did not do very well on better regulation. Having admitted that the Conservatives did not get it right after 18 years, it is a bit much for her to complain that we have not got everything right in the first two and a half years. As she rightly said, there is a powerful Whitehall culture and a complex and deep-seated bureaucracy that will sometimes make regulations and guidance much too complicated and will fail to sort out some problems as quickly as they should be sorted out.

With the backing of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, we are trying to put in place powerful forces for better regulation. That is the point of the new ministerial panel, the new Small Business Service and the better regulation task force, and it is enormously important.

My hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Central and for Middlesborough, South and Cleveland, East rightly referred to the entrepreneurialism of many Asian communities. In my constituency city of Leicester, the Indian community in particular has generated vibrant and dynamic small businesses, as well as rather large businesses, often from almost nothing, which is what many in that community had when they arrived in Britain. We must not only celebrate that and other such success but support enterprise in other Asian communities and in the Afro-Caribbean community, which have other problems.

I am happy to say that I shall soon announce the appointment of the chairman of the new ethnic minority business forum. I hope that its membership will soon be in place, to ensure an early meeting. That organisation will work alongside the small business council, and the two bodies, which will no doubt have some overlapping membership, will give the Government a sounding board and a direct voice on the experience of a range of small business people from exactly the sort of diverse background to which my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central rightly referred.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) referred to the importance of bringing down the cost of telecommunications to enable business to connect more easily and cheaply to the internet. I entirely share their concerns; the cost of off-peak, weekend access to the internet, which a residential customer might use, is among the cheapest in the world, but the peak-hour, weekday access is undoubtedly too expensive. I want those costs to continue to fall much further and faster and I want a greater variety of tariff packages, including the option of a flat-rate subscription without a taximeter running for every extra minute of the call.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister briefly explain why she has not tackled the problem in clause 10 of the Electronic Communications Bill?

Ms Hewitt: It is extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman should be asking us to propose a particular tariff structure on a private company in primary legislation. That is an absurd proposition. I did not realise that the hon. Gentleman was a devotee of various bits of old Labour, but there we are.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister give way again?

Ms Hewitt: I am sorry; we are near the end of the debate. We will get the costs down and get the tariff packages right by driving competition further into the telecommunications marketplace, as we are doing, and by having tough and effective regulation, which Oftel is delivering. Last week, Oftel had a useful meeting with the internet service providers, with BT and with other interested parties. They will shortly settle interconnection charges with BT for internet access

[Ms Hewitt]

which will enable a range of tariff packages, including unmetered access, to be introduced within the next couple of months. After that, there will be the introduction of digital subscriber loop technology, local loop unbundling, third generation mobile and fixed access, broad band wireless, all of them intensifying competition in the local loop and bringing costs down. That is part of getting the infrastructure and the conditions right for business success. Our commitment to e-commerce success means that we will do that extremely energetically.

The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton asked a question about the minimum wage and company directors. The minimum wage, rightly, does not apply to office holders, which includes directors of companies. She continued to complain about what she called over-regulation and what we know as fair standards for workers. It is not only Government Members who regret the position of the official Opposition on the matter; millions of employees and hundreds of thousands of small business owners regret the fact that we have an official Opposition who believe that wages should be allowed to fall through the floor, but do not believe that employers should have a right to paid holidays and a modest right to unpaid parental leave. It is an absurd position, but if the Conservative party had the chance to implement such beliefs it would mean a real fall in living standards for millions of ordinary people in this country who have benefited from the minimum wage and from the working families tax credit, which the official Opposition are also committed to repeal. That is not the way to create the conditions for business success.

The way to do that is to ensure that we get the macro-economic conditions right, as we are doing, and that we get the tax environment right, as we are doing by cutting corporation tax rates to their lowest ever and by introducing a 10p starting rate of income tax which will benefit the several million self-employed people who run small businesses.

The way to get the conditions right is to get the infrastructure right, as I said, and to ensure that we regulate when necessary and when the benefits clearly outweigh the costs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central said, very eloquently. When we regulate, we will ensure that we do it in the most effective and simple way possible, always using the litmus test of thinking small first. That is precisely what we shall do to ensure that under our stewardship small businesses in our country continue to flourish and that more of them start, survive and succeed and become world beaters in their own right.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 10 January 2000

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Stalking

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will issue guidance to the Crown Prosecution Service on improving communications with the victims of stalking; and if he will make a statement. [104040]

The Solicitor-General: The Victim's Charter commits the police to keep all victims informed of developments in the case regardless of the nature of the offence. Currently, the CPS provides to the police information about prosecution decisions for them to forward to victims, or their families, as appropriate.

The CPS has a specific role in stalking cases to assist victims when the court has made a restraining order under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, and when subsequently there is a need to seek a variation of the order. The victim is informed of any application to vary the restraining order and asked to express views and, if necessary, to attend. Again, however, the guiding principle is that the CPS communicates with the victim through the police.

The Home Office will shortly be issuing national 'good practice' guidelines to the police and other agencies resulting from the final evaluation of the "One Stop Shop" initiative, which was established to see how the Victim's Charter commitment to keep victims informed might best be met.

Following recommendations in Sir Iain Glidewell's report into the CPS and Sir William Macpherson's report into the death of Stephen Lawrence, the CPS is committed to adopting a more proactive role in communicating with victims. The Service is currently piloting arrangements for taking on responsibility to communicate direct with victims rather than via the police. The pilots will be evaluated before an implementation plan is devised.

PRIME MINISTER

United Kingdom European Delegations

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library the latest Information Bulletin on the activities of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Assembly of Western European Union covering the period May to October. [104032]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Defence Systems Exhibition

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action the Government are taking regarding reports in connection with the 1999 Defence Systems Equipment Exhibition that an official at the Pakistan High Commission in London offered to sell anti-personnel mines destined for Sudan. [104296]

Mr. Vaz: The allegation that an official at the Pakistan High Commission offered to sell anti-personnel mines has been referred to HM Customs and Excise as the appropriate law enforcement agency and I have protested strongly to the Pakistani High Commission.

Konrad Kalejs

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials have discussed the case of Konrad Kalejs with the Australian authorities; and what was the nature of the discussions and information received; [104389]

(2) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials have discussed the case of Konrad Kalejs with the Latvian authorities; and what was the nature of the discussions and information received; [104391]

(3) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials have discussed the case of Konrad Kalejs with the United States authorities; and what was the nature of the discussions and information received; [104390]

(4) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials have discussed the case of Konrad Kalejs with the Canadian authorities; and what was the nature of the discussions and information received. [104377]

Mr. Vaz: Neither the Secretary of State nor FCO Ministers have had contact with their American, Australian, Canadian, or Latvian counterparts on the issue of Konrad Kalejs.

At the request of the Home Office, British officials in Riga and Canberra discussed Kalejs with host Governments. British officials passed a request for information from the American Embassy in London to the Home Office. Officials in Ottawa and Washington have been in contact with their host Governments.

The purpose of discussions with the Australian and Latvian authorities was to make them aware of developments in the Kalejs case, and to inform them of our readiness to pass on all relevant information, held by HMG.

The purpose of discussions with the Americans and Canadians was to ask that all relevant information they had on Kalejs be passed to authorities in Australia and Latvia.

The Latvian authorities informed us on 3 January that they were reopening their investigation into Kalejs, indicated that they had first investigated him in 1992, and said that they had since maintained close links with US and Canadian authorities.

The Australians informed officials that they did not have an extradition treaty with Latvia, but would consider any extradition request made.

British Diplomatic Posts (Costs)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the running costs of the British embassies in *(a)* Paris and *(b)* Washington. [104087]

Mr. Hain: The running costs for Paris include all Locally Engaged (LE) staff costs of subordinate Posts throughout France. Similarly Washington costs include LE staff throughout the USA. The total staff levels are 248 for Paris, of which 44 are UK based, and 535 for Washington, of which 55 are UK based. It is therefore not possible to draw proper comparisons between the running costs of the two Embassies. However, the ratio of 5:4 UK based staff between Washington and Paris is not considered unreasonable.

It is important to look at these figures in context: the FCO employs fewer staff and costs less to run than Birmingham City Council. The cost of running the FCO in London and at its 221 posts overseas amounts to less than one-third of one per cent. (0.3 per cent.) of all Government expenditure, and less than 0.15 per cent. of UK GDP. The total FCO budget costs each man, woman and child in Britain only 5p a day.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the annual running costs were of UK embassies in *(a)* the European Union and *(b)* the USA, in the last year for which figures are available. [104130]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 109W, specifically the answers to parts *(a)* and *(b)*.

International Tribunal on War Crimes

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role of British forces in providing information to the International Tribunal on War Crimes in Kosovo. [102342]

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to reply.

The British Government are strong supporters of the work of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in Kosovo (ICTY), as in other parts of the Former Yugoslavia. As part of KFOR, British forces have assisted the work of ICTY investigators, notably by providing a secure environment in which they can work. British service personnel were also involved, earlier this year, in debriefing Kosovar refugees, in Macedonia and elsewhere, and the information gained has been passed to the Tribunal.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Planning Approvals (New Homes)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to *(a)* limit and *(b)* reduce planning approvals for new homes in West Sussex. [104308]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The decision whether to grant planning permission for proposed new housing developments is, in the first instance, a matter for the local planning authority concerned. Applications shall be determined in accordance with the development plan for the area, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. In formulating their development plans local authorities must have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State. We expect to publish new national planning policy guidance on housing (PPG3), and final proposals for the new regional planning guidance for the South East (RPG9), soon.

Environmental Assessments

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the Bills published since the Queen's Speech were accompanied by a statement of their implications for the environment. [104271]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is the Government's policy that environmental aspects should be considered fully alongside the economic and social considerations during the development or review of a policy. My Department stands ready to advise on appraisal and monitoring systems. But it is for individual Departments to set up their own systems to ensure that their policies take account of the environment and that, where necessary, environmental appraisals are carried out. The overall policy and its operation is monitored by the Green Ministers' Committee, which reports annually in July.

Since the Queen's Speech, the DETR has published two Bills, the Transport Bill and the Local Government Bill. The Transport Bill and a Regulatory, Environmental and Equal Treatment Appraisal were published on 1 December 1999.

The Local Government Bill provides a new discretionary power for local authorities to take steps which, in their view, promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of those who live, work in or visit their local area, in order to improve the quality of life locally. The remainder of the Bill addresses the way in which local authorities are organised and elected and carry out their business. In this case, no specific environmental impact statement has been published.

Driving Licences

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much the medical section of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency pays to private opticians to conduct sight tests and field tests. [104080]

Mr. Hill: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) has only just started to use private opticians. DVLA currently pays optometrists £35 to undertake each visual field test, which, on current volumes of tests, will amount to an annual total of £280,000.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will encourage local authorities to publish the composition of their workforces in terms of standard age groups, ethnic origin and gender in their annual reports. [104015]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 1999, authorities will be required to report annually their performance against specified national performance indicators. Details were published on 23 December in "Best Value and Audit Commission Performance Indicators for 2000–2001". They include indicators on the representation of minority ethnic staff in the workforce and the proportion of women in senior management posts. There is no indicator in respect of the age breakdown of the workforce, but the indicators will be reviewed annually and updated in the light of consultation with the range of authority and customer interests.

Early Retirement

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many employees of his Department took early retirement packages, and at what total cost, in the financial year 1996–97. [104098]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In the financial year 1996–97, 462 employees of the Department of the Environment and the Department of Transport took early retirement. In addition, some 228 employees took early severance. It would not be possible to separate retirement and severance costs without disproportionate cost and effort, but the total costs of early retirements and severance in the year concerned was £23,322,610. This includes ongoing costs of departures from previous years.

Objective 1 Funding

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the requirements for match public funds from his Department for the EU Objective 1 regions of *(a)* Cornwall and Scilly, *(b)* Merseyside and *(c)* South Yorkshire for each of the seven years of the programme. [104301]

(2) what level of match public funds from his Department are available to EU Objective 1 regions for each of the next seven calendar years. [104305]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department will provide significant financial support for all three Objective 1 programmes through a number of funding mechanisms. These include the Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal for Communities, as well as mainstream funding made available to local authorities. Local partnerships can prioritise the use of these resources to fund projects jointly with the Structural Funds, thereby boosting their impact.

It is too early to estimate how much my Department's contribution is likely to be over the 2000–06 programme period. This will depend on the types of projects which local partnerships select for support over the programming period.

Strategic Rail Authority

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to appoint a representative to the Strategic Rail Authority from *(a)* the National Assembly for Wales, *(b)* the Northern Ireland Assembly, *(c)* the Scottish Parliament and *(d)* the United Kingdom Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [104144]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans to appoint such representatives to the Strategic Rail Authority. The Secretary of State has, however, consulted the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Executive about Welsh and Scottish representation on the SRA. It is not intended that the responsibilities of the SRA will extend to Northern Ireland.

Homelessness

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received over the Government's plans to tackle homelessness. [102936]

Mr. Mullin: My Department has received a large number of representations in recent months from both interested organisations and members of the public, on a wide range of homelessness issues, and in particular on our recently published plans to tackle rough sleeping.

From its establishment in April 1999, the Rough Sleepers Unit consulted extensively with key partners as part of the development of its strategy, "Coming in from the Cold", which was published on 15 December 1999. Organisations that made representations during this process included other Government departments, local government, other statutory bodies including the Police and the National Health Service, key national and local voluntary organisations, the business community, faith leaders and rough sleepers themselves, as well as members of the general public.

Also, my Department has set up an official-level sounding board, which includes representatives from the Local Government Association, the Association of London Government, Shelter, the Chartered Institute of Housing, the National Housing Federation and other organisations with an interest in social housing, to discuss proposals for changes to policy on homelessness and the allocation of social housing. Our proposals are still at an early stage, but we intend to consult on them widely in due course.

Dog Identification Working Group

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he plans to initiate public consultations when the Dog Identification Working Group publishes its report. [104307]

Mr. Hill: The report of the Dog Identification Group is expected by the summer of this year. We will consider what the appropriate arrangements for consultation are to be nearer that time.

NATS

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the figure of £350 million for the partial sale of NATS was calculated; and what plans he has to write off the outstanding debts owed by NATS. [104097]

Mr. Mullin: The estimate of £350 million in proceeds from the strategic partner in NATS is net of any debt restructuring and was calculated by our advisers in order to give Parliament a broad estimate of the possible proceeds from the proposed sale. The precise amount of the proceeds will be the subject of commercial negotiations with the strategic partner.

NATS loans from the NLF must be extinguished when the PPP is put in place so as to avoid any hidden subsidy to the PPP. This may be achieved by repayment, or by writing them off and replacing them with new commercial debt. Final decisions will be taken in consultation with the selected strategic partner when establishing an optimum capital structure for the company.

Ward Boundary Reviews

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what procedures exist for objections to be made, and appeals to be heard, in respect of proposals by the Local Government Boundary Commission concerning ward boundary reviews. [104228]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Representations, both for and against proposals, can be made at any time to the Local Government Commission (LGC) during the review process and to the Secretary of State after the publication of the Final Report and until an Order is made. It is vital for the integrity of democratic local government that the process of making local authority electoral arrangements should be, and be seen to be, fully independent. Therefore, it is the Government's policy that, unless there is compelling evidence available to it that the recommendations of the LGC may be flawed, it will accept them. However all representations received are fully considered before arriving at a final decision.

Waste Recycling

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of waste collected for recycling was exported in the last year for which figures are available, broken down into *(a)* glass, *(b)* paper, *(c)* plastics and *(d)* metals. [100941]

Mr. Mullin *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The table shows the percentage of waste collected for recycling in the United Kingdom that was exported in 1998.

Material	*Percentage exported*	*Amount exported (thousand tonnes)*
Glass	13	69
Paper and board	8	402
Plastics	24	40
Ferrous metals	36	3,193

Sources:
British Glass Federation; Paper Federation of Great Britain; British Plastics Federation; Iron and Steel Statistics Bureau; HM Customs and Excise.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will expand the new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme to include energy efficiency improvements to the fabric of buildings constructed with solid walls. [101426]

Mr. Meacher: Households eligible for the New Homes Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) who live in properties with solid walls will receive loft insulation and draught proofing under the scheme, to improve the energy efficiency of the building fabric.

With regard to the solid wall insulation, as I detailed in the answer I gave on Tuesday 19 October 1999, *Official Report,* column 491W, this does not appear to be appropriate for the packages of improvements to be offered under the new HEES. Therefore external or internal wall insulation measures will not be available under the scheme.

Instead, the New HEES packages available for these solid wall properties include higher levels of heating improvements than those for cavity walled homes, so providing similar reductions in fuel costs for both types of property.

Councillor Keith May

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received as to the ability of Councillor Keith May to speak on behalf of his electorate in relation to former Land Settlement Association property; and if he will make a statement. [102716]

Ms Armstrong: I have received three representations about this matter—the request for a dispensation under section 97 of the Local Government Act 1972 from Councillor Keith May, a letter from the Head of Members' Services at Bedford Borough Council and a letter from the right hon. and learned Member himself. I replied to the right hon. and learned Member on 22 December 1999.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103842]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Delivering efficient and modern public services is a key part of the Government's agenda for improving productivity. Greater efficiency is being sought therefore within the public sector to ensure that the most effective results are obtained from available resources. The Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA), set out in "Public Services for the Future", Cm 4181, includes a range of measures for taking this forward, both within the Department itself and in other public sector bodies.

Those measures which will help raise the Department's own productivity are listed at pages 29–31 of Cm 4181 and include:

"Better quality services" reviews over a five year period

Electronic Government measures. The Department's target is that 87 per cent. of its business transactions should be capable of being

conducted electronically by 2002, subject to the private insurance industry and Post Office Counters Limited achieving their own individual targets

sickness absence targets, and introducing measures to reduce the levels of sickness absence

measures to reduce the incidence of fraud

measures to improve procurement practice

specific productivity measures for the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the Highways Agency, Planning Inspectorate, Health and Safety Commission and Executive, and DETR Central.

In addition, the 1999–2000 business plan for the Planning Inspectorate includes a target to generate a 3 per cent. efficiency improvement in the use of running costs compared with the previous year. The Highways Agency also has a series of performance indicators related to running costs, listed under key target 17 at Annex B of its business plan for 1999–2000 (copies of which are available in the Library of the House).

The Department's gross running costs provision for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 is set out in its PSA. The productivity measures listed above will enable the Department to increase the quantity and quality of outputs delivered by its running costs expenditure over this period.

Flood and Coastal Defence

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many meetings his officials have attended with Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food officials on the joint review of flood and coastal defence funding. [103861]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My officials have attended one meeting with officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The consultation document was agreed in correspondence and joint consideration is being given to the responses.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the joint review of flood and coastal defence funding. [103862]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and my Department have received 54 representations from a range of bodies concerned with flood and coastal defence. Copies of the responses have been placed in MAFF's library at 3, Whitehall Place, West Block, London SW1A 2HH and are available for inspection.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure the joint review of flood and coastal defence funding meets his Department's objectives on the water environment; and if he will make a statement. [103860]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The funding review is taking place in the context of Government policy on flood and coastal defence. The Environment Agency is making a full contribution to the review.

Correspondence

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will reply to the letter of 18 October sent by Nigel Petrie on behalf of Edison Mission Energy to Mr. L. Jaero of his Department; and if he will make a statement on how this issue has been handled by his Department. [103737]

Ms Armstrong: The letter concerned the rateable value to be prescribed for pumped-storage energy schemes as part of the current revaluation of non-domestic rates. There are no pumped-storage schemes in England. The values of the plants at Dinorwig and Ffestiniog, which were the subject of Edison Mission Energy's letter, will be prescribed by the National Assembly for Wales.

The letter followed a series of meetings between electricity producers and officials from the Department, the Scottish Executive, the National Assembly for Wales and the Valuation Office Agency.

The Department copied the Company's letter to the Valuation Office Agency, who advise both the Department and the National Assembly for Wales on rating matters. However, officials mistakenly thought that Edison Mission Energy was aware of the constitutional position and that they had written separately to the National Assembly. The letter was not, therefore, forwarded to the Assembly and no reply was sent to the Company.

I regret this misunderstanding, which came to light when the Company wrote again to the Department on 17 December. The Department replied on 20 December and copied both the letters of 17 December and 18 October to officials in the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Executive.

Countryside Bill

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from environmental groups concerning the proposed Countryside Bill. [103932]

Mr. Meacher: Since the announcement of the Bill in the Queen's speech on 17 November, I have received a number of representations from groups and individuals, many of which have environmental interests. Our proposals have been broadly welcomed. Particular attention is being paid to the scope of our proposals for rights of access and the implications for occupiers of land, the detail of the rights of way proposals and the scope of our proposals for wildlife and for sites of special scientific interest.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Drugs

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures his Department is taking to tackle the problems caused by drugs in local communities. [103382]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Action by the Home Office is being taken forward as part of the Government's 10-year national anti-drugs strategy "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain", published in April 1998.

The Home Office is contributing to the strategy on several fronts. The Department's Drugs Prevention Advisory Service (DPAS), which succeeded the Drug

Prevention Initiative on 1 April 1999, is actively promoting effective community-based drugs prevention and supporting the delivery of Aim 1 (helping young people resist drug misuse), and Aim 2 (protecting communities from drug-related anti-social and criminal behaviour) of the national strategy.

DPAS is the first Government drugs prevention organisation to cover the whole of England. It works closely with Drug Action Teams—the bodies charged with local delivery of the national strategy—to encourage and support the development of effective local prevention initiatives. DPAS also provides advice and support to community-based partnerships on how to address drug related problems within communities. In addition, it acts as a pressure point on other relevant initiatives and programmes such as community safety, crime reduction and community regeneration, to ensure that drug issues are included on those agendas.

The Home Office crime reduction strategy places a strong emphasis on breaking the link between drugs and crime. Many acquisitive crimes are connected to drug misuse. The crime reduction strategy has a particular focus on domestic burglary and vehicle crime. For example, funding is being made available to protect over two million homes in 500 high burglary areas over the next two years. Moreover, the Government introduced new legislation this month which provides for mandatory sentences of at least three years for third-time burglars. Targeted policing initiatives are also being adopted to tackle crimes like drug dealing in communities.

Other measures designed to break the link between drugs and crime include the piloting of Drug Treatment and Testing Orders under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; the provision of £20 million to pump prime the establishment of arrest referral schemes across England and Wales to lead drug misusing offenders into treatment; and proposals to extend drug testing across the criminal justice system.

Gamma Hydroxy Butyrate

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to reclassify gamma hydroxy butyrate as a drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971; [103379]

(2) what steps he has taken to limit the availability of gamma hydroxy butyrate. [103375]

Mr. Charles Clarke: With regard to the question of the classification of gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB) under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Benn) on 8 December 1999, *Official Report,* column 532W.

That reply mentioned the work of the Medicines Control Agency (MCA) to counter the illicit manufacture and sale of GHB, and it might be helpful to elaborate on this. In addition to investigating offences under the Medicines Act, the MCA has taken action on a number of fronts in recent months to reduce the supply of GHB. The Agency has issued an advertising alert to the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and circulated briefing to all heads of police forces and all trading standards and environmental health offices. MCA officers have also targeted a number of sex shops and similar premises to educate owners on the law relating to the advertising and sale of GHB, and followed this up with regular compliance checks.

The National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) also has a key role to play. The NCIS Drugs Section works with the chemical industry, the Home Office and police forces to gather intelligence on the illicit manufacture of drugs. In the last year this intelligence led to the discovery of eight illicit drug laboratories producing amphetamine, ecstasy and GHB.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the use of gamma hydroxy butyrate as a date rape drug. [103376]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is currently little evidence of gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB) being used to facilitate rape. Forensic Science Service analysis since March of last year of samples taken from 100 victims of sexual assault and rape where the use of drugs is suspected has identified GHB in four cases.

While the analysis has provided no direct linkage between GHB and the sexual offence, rape is clearly an extremely serious offence and it is important for the Government to have a clear understanding of the extent of the drug rape problem. With this in mind, the Home Office sponsored a Metropolitan police research initiative into drug assisted rape, which is due to be concluded in April 2000. Ministers will consider the findings and recommendations of this study.

Separately, a Home Office led review was set up at the beginning of 1999 to review the law on sex offences in England and Wales. As part of its considerations, the review is considering the law relating to consent, and circumstances where consent is not present. It is also considering whether the current offence of administering drugs to obtain or facilitate intercourse (section 4 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956) is still appropriate. The review expects to report its recommendations to Ministers in the spring, and we plan to publish a consultation paper shortly after this.

Police Grant

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the factors that determined the police grant *(a)* net expenditure and *(b)* percentage increase in real terms for Staffordshire in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [103621]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Police grant allocations to individual authorities for the years in question were determined under a needs-based funding formula and were approved by the House of Commons. For 1997–98 and 1998–99 police authority expenditure levels were subject to capping limits on budget increases. For 1999–2000, no capping limits were set. The budget increase for that year was determined by Staffordshire Police Authority.

Net expenditure levels are determined by deducting income from gross expenditure. The percentage changes in real terms for the Staffordshire Police Authority for each of the years in question will reflect the application of Her Majesty's Treasury's Gross Domestic Product deflators.

Immigration and Nationality Directorate

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the average length of time taken by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to process travel document applications; [103596]

(2) what steps he is taking to reduce the length of time taken by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate to process travel document applications. [103597]

Mrs. Roche: New applications have, since September, been dealt with under a fast track procedure and the majority are being resolved within four weeks of receipt. But there are around 7,000 applications made between January and August 1999 still outstanding. Work on these applications is progressing steadily but it will be some months before they are all cleared, due to a threefold increase in the number of new applications. The number of staff in the section has increased threefold in recent months, and output has increased fivefold.

Remand Places (Juveniles)

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Youth Justice Board will assume responsibility for the procurement and provision of secure remand places for juveniles. [103868]

Mr. Boateng: The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales will assume responsibility for commissioning and purchasing places in secure accommodation for remanded and sentenced children and young people in April 2000.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the cost to local authorities in the last year for which figures are available of *(a)* providing secure remand places for juveniles and for the escort of juveniles for court appearances and *(b)* the reimbursement paid under Section 21 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. [103869]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Children and young people remanded to local authority secure accommodation are the responsibility of the local authority designated by the court. Information on the costs to local authorities of providing secure remand places and escorts for court appearances is not collected centrally.

The secure remand provisions in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 were implemented on 1 June 1999. On the basis of the claims so far submitted, the Home Office has paid local authorities nearly £500,000 for the additional costs incurred by them in such cases.

Drug Testing

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his proposals for testing offenders and suspected offenders for drug use will include tests for *(a)* cannabis, *(b)* amphetamine, *(c)* ecstasy, *(d)* cocaine, *(e)* LSD and *(f)* heroin. [103744]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The detail of the proposal to extend drug testing across the criminal justice system is currently being formulated. One option under consideration is to concentrate testing on those who are misusing heroin and/or cocaine, at least initially, as these are the drugs which research shows are most closely linked to crime.

Prisoners (Under-18s)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women under the age of 18 years were serving a prison sentence in England and Wales on 1 November. [103728]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available provisional information is for 31 October 1999. On that date there were 1,689 sentenced males and 81 sentenced females aged 15–17 years in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales.

Information on the population of persons aged 15–17 years in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales is published in "Prison statistics England and Wales", a copy of which is in the Library.

Konrad Kalejs

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials have discussed the case of Konrad Kalejs with the United States authorities; and what was the nature of the discussions and information received; [104383]

(2) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials have discussed the case of Konrad Kalejs with the Canadian authorities; and what was the nature of the discussions and information received; [104385]

(3) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials have discussed the case of Konrad Kalejs with the Latvian authorities; and what was the nature of the discussions and information received; [104384]

(4) on what occasions *(a)* he, *(b)* Ministers in his Department and *(c)* his officials have discussed the case of Konrad Kalejs with the Australian authorities; and what was the nature of the discussions and information received. [104382]

Mr. Straw: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was asked by one of my officials on 30 December to inform the Australian and Latvian Governments promptly through our respective Missions of the fact that Konrad Kalejs was present here, that the Metropolitan police were making inquiries into his alleged involvement in war crimes in Latvia and that he might leave the United Kingdom at an early date. Action was taken on 4 January to update the information which had been given to the Latvian authorities.

My officials were also in direct contact with the Australian High Commission in London on several occasions in the week commencing 3 January in order to ascertain the status of inquiries by the Australian authorities about Mr. Kalejs and to alert them to his intended departure to Australia on 6 January.

An official also discussed developments with a member of staff at the Embassy of the United States on 6 January following a request for information on the case by the Embassy to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

There was no Home Office contact with the Canadian authorities.

Neither I nor any of my Ministerial colleagues have had any direct contact with the Australian, United States, Latvian or Canadian authorities about Konrad Kalejs.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the police have questioned Konrad Kalejs about alleged war crimes. [104380]

Mr. Straw: The conduct of this and any other criminal investigation lies within the operational responsibility of the relevant Chief Officer of Police, in this case the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis. The Commissioner has told me that in the event it was not deemed appropriate to question Mr. Kalejs, since the view was taken that, under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, all this could not have been carried out in the circumstances of the case without arresting him.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons he is minded to deport Konrad Kalejs from the United Kingdom. [104388]

Mr. Straw: I was minded to deport Konrad Kalejs on the ground that his presence in the United Kingdom was not conducive to the public good. I reached that decision because I was satisfied that reasonable grounds existed to believe that Kalejs was complicit in war crimes committed in Latvia between 1941 and 1944. In coming to that decision I took account of all the evidence available to me, including that which had emerged from investigations carried out by the Australian, American and Canadian authorities, as well as the Metropolitan Police War Crimes Unit, in the early 1990s.

My decision that reasonable grounds existed to believe that Kalejs was complicit in war crimes was reached where necessary on the balance of probabilities. I was aware that for the police to mount a successful prosecution in the courts they would have been required to produce evidence to a different and far higher standard of proof. The Metropolitan Police have now confirmed that they have concluded that on the evidence available there were no grounds on which to charge Kalejs.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the police investigation into the allegations against Konrad Kalejs was completed. [104381]

Mr. Straw: I understand from the Metropolitan Police Commissioner that the Organised Crime Unit concluded its assessment of the information available relating to the allegations against Konrad Kalejs on 4 January. I was told on 31 December that on the available evidence, the Metropolitan Police Service believed that there were at that time no grounds for making an arrest of Mr. Kalejs, and in the light of this information Mr. Kalejs was served with a notice that I was minded to deport him. The commencement of this deportation process would not in any way have compromised any arrest or charge of Mr. Kalejs before his departure from the United Kingdom.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what new *(a)* claims have been made and *(b)* evidence has come to light in the case of Konrad Kalejs since he served notice that he was minded to deport Mr. Kalejs. [104386]

Mr. Straw: I am not aware of any new claims which have been made relating to the alleged responsibility of Konrad Kalejs for war crimes since, on 2 January, I served notice that I was minded to deport him, and I am advised by the Metropolitan Police that no new evidence has been revealed to them since then.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what information he has received about Konrad Kalejs's intended destination on leaving the United Kingdom. [104387]

Mr. Straw: Konrad Kalejs departed the United Kingdom from Heathrow Airport at 1100 hours on 6 January, on a flight bound for Melbourne via Singapore.

Asylum Seekers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how (1) many appeals against asylum decisions were refused in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999; and what proportion this was of the total number of appeals in each year; [104042]

(2) how many asylum seekers whose appeals were refused in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999 have been deported; and what proportion of the total number of those whose appeals were refused this was in each year. [104045]

Mrs. Roche: In 1998 a total of 25,300 asylum appeals were determined by Adjudicators of the Immigration Appellate Authority. Of this total 21,100 appeals (84 per cent.) were dismissed. Information for 1999 is not yet available.

The requested information on the number of asylum seekers whose appeals were refused and deported is available only at disproportionate cost through the examination of individual case records.

Passport Agency

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a copy of the Passport Agency document,"Blueprint for the Future". [103960]

Mrs. Roche: Yes. The Passport Agency's document "Blueprint for the Future" has been produced to inform its staff of its plans for the future as set out in the Agency's Corporate and Business Plans 1999–2002, and its separate Action Plan. Copies of these Plans were placed in the Library on 6 December, and copies of the Passport Agency's "Blueprint for the Future" have now been placed there as well.

Police (Discipline Hearings)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide guidance to police forces about allowing officers facing disciplinary hearings the assistance, if requested, of a representative of the Black Police Association. [103919]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 533–34W. The choice of representative at a discipline hearing is a matter for the officer concerned. It would be inappropriate for me to issue guidance suggesting who he or she should be.

Drugs (Prisons)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many occasions were recorded in each prison of the *(a)* illegal use and *(b)* supply of drugs in the past year. [R] [103913]

Mr. Boateng: The table gives provisional figures for the number of occasions in each establishment that all attempts of *(a)* the illegal use of and *(b)* the supply of drugs were recorded for the period January to November 1999.

Drug offences punished in prisons in England and Wales January-November 1999 [1,2]

Establishment	*Unauthorised use of a controlled drug*	*Sells/delivers controlled drug*
Altcourse	77	—
Askham Grange	14	—
Acklington	36	1
Albany	4	—
Aldington	44	1
Ashwell	251	—
Aylesbury	64	—
Belmarsh	222	—
Buckley Hall	214	1
Blundestone	63	—
Bedford	26	—
Brockhill	25	1
Bristol	107	1
Birmingham	479	1
Bullingdon	189	1
Brinsford	38	—
Blakenhurst	490	6
Bullwood Hall	42	—
Brixton	105	1
Chelmsford	71	1
Cardiff	169	—
Camp Hill	116	—
Cookham Wood	41	—
Coldingley	60	—
Castington	46	—
Channings Wood	79	—
Canterbury	70	—
Dartmoor	63	—
Drake Hall	42	—
Durham	38	—
Doncaster	4	1
Dorchester	36	—
Deerbolt	89	—
Dover	69	—
Downview	29	—
Erlestoke	186	—
Standford Hill	71	—
East Sutton Park	5	—
Everthorpe	280	—
Eastwood Park	39	—
Exeter	66	1
Elmley	230	2
Ford	93	—
Foston Hall	85	—
Frankland	107	—
Feltham	61	2
Full Sutton	80	—
Featherstone	245	1
Garth	118	—
Gloucester	109	—
Guys Marsh	209	—
Grendon	37	—
Glen Parva	151	—
Gartree	109	—
Hollesley Bay	89	—
Huntercombe	79	1
Hatfield	57	—
Hewell Grange	18	—
Holme House	119	1
Hindley	41	—
Hull	6	—
Highdown	266	1
Highpoint	114	7
Haverigg	158	—
Holloway	22	—
Kirkham	99	—
Kirklevington	38	—
Lancaster	109	—
Leicester	67	—
Leeds	379	3
Lancaster Farm	56	—
Lowdham Grange	169	—
Lindholme	391	5
Lincoln	153	—
Long Lartin	166	—
Latchmere House	13	—
Low Newton	39	—
Liverpool	513	1
Littlehey	140	—
Lewes	154	—
Leyhill	158	—
Moorland	109	—
Morton Hall	59	—
Manchester	341	—
Maidstone	100	—
The Mount	80	—
New Hall	48	—
Nottingham	51	—
Northallerton	32	—
North Sea Camp	64	—
Norwich	117	—
Onley	20	—
Portland	83	—
Parkhurst	99	1
Preston	199	1
Parc	297	—
Kingston (Portsmouth)	18	—
Pentonville	223	1
Rochester	21	—
Reading	14	—
Ranby	134	6
Risley	267	—
Send	24	—
Stafford	316	—
Stoke Heath	56	2
Stocken	223	2
Swaleside	105	—
Shepton Mallet	162	—
Swinfen Hall	29	—
Styal	48	1
Sudbury	112	—
Swansea	56	—
Shrewsbury	93	2
Thorn Cross	101	—
Usk	30	—
The Verne	55	—
The Weare	103	—
Wellingborough	229	1
Winchester	127	—
Wakefield	17	—
Wealstun	219	—
Woodhill	87	1
Wayland	129	2
Wymott	129	—
Werrington	5	—
The Wolds	104	—
Whitemoor	137	—
Wormwood Scrubs	73	—
Whatton	3	—
Wandsworth	134	1
Wetherby	34	—
All	14,722	62

[1] Provisional figures
[2] Includes attempts

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison staff or officials, indicating the grades, have been charged with or convicted of allowing the supply of illegal drugs in prison in the last year. [R] [103914]

Mr. Boateng: Three prison staff have been charged with or convicted of allowing the supply of illegal drugs in prison during 1999. The grades of these staff are one industrial, one instructional officer and one prison officer.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102340]

Mr. Straw: Records for the Home Office estate are not held centrally. My six central London headquarters buildings have between them one room for ethnic minority religious use, two rooms for mother and baby facilities and 11 rooms for smokers. Each building also has first aid facilities. These serve a total population of about 3,900 staff, including the United Kingdom Passport Agency, Police Information Technology Organisation and Her Majesty's Prison Service.

Building	*Room number*	*Size (m^2)*
Queen Anne's Gate		
Smoking rooms		
1st floor	167	19.1
6th floor	665	29.2
8th floor	833	21.5
Mother and baby facilities		
3rd floor	301a	7.7
Clive House		
Muslim prayer room		
4th floor	407	25.3
Smoking room		
3rd floor	330	40
Grenadier House		
Smoking room		
4th floor	408	33.2
Mother and baby facilities		
Ground floor	GO2	13.8
Horseferry House		
Smoking rooms		
1st floor	124	24.4
2nd floor	245	16.8
4th floor	410	19.9
7th floor	760	15.2
Abell House		
Muslim advisers room		
7th floor	706	17
Smoking room		
2nd floor	225a	17
Cleland House		
Smoking room		
3rd floor	317	18
Works in hand to create another in Cleland House		

Stalking

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what provision there is for the psychiatric assessment of persons convicted of stalking under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997; [104038]

(2) if he will issue guidance to police forces on improving communications with the victims of stalking; and if he will make a statement; [104039]

(3) if he will make a statement on the notification to *(a)* the police and *(b)* the courts of changes of name or address by persons subject to a restraining order under section 5 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. [104041]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Anyone convicted of an offence under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 is entitled to seek psychiatric help voluntarily, but the Act itself makes no provision for the court to compel anyone to seek such an assessment.

I have commissioned research into the effectiveness of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, and will respond to any recommendations for changing the Act once I have seen the report. I have no plans to make a statement on this subject before that time.

Detention Centre

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the specific planned location of the new detention centre for those held under the Immigration Act 1999; and what progress has been made towards its opening. [104083]

Mrs. Roche: All immigration detainees are held under the Immigration Act 1971 as amended. If my hon. Friend is referring to the powers in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to make regulations enabling a person granted temporary admission to be required to reside at accommodation provided by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary there are no immediate plans to make such regulations.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letters to him dated 23 August, 7 October and 11 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. Mohammed Abdullah and Mrs. Nargis Begum. [104068]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton on 5 January 2000. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letters to him dated 4 August, 16 September and 19 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. N. Doski. [104069]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton on 5 January 2000. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Drug Treatment and Testing Orders

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answers to the hon. Member for Aylesbury of 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 241–42W, concerning drug treatment and testing orders, when he will write to the hon. member for Aylesbury about drug treatment and testing orders. [104135]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I wrote to the hon. Member on 17 December 1999.

European Convention on Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 8W, concerning training in respect of the European Convention on Human Rights, for what reason his answer did not deal with training given to the Prison Service. [104149]

Mr. Boateng: Information about training given by the Prison Service in respect of the European Convention on Human Rights was omitted from my answer of 13 December owing to an administrative error. I apologise to my hon. Friend for this oversight.

The information he required is that the Prison Service intends to provide all personnel working in prison establishments and at headquarters with information about the Human Rights Act 1998, which incorporates the Convention into United Kingdom law. Training will be provided as necessary.

Metropolitan Police Service

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to publish Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary's report on the recent inspection of the Metropolitan police service, which he directed as a result of recommendation four of the Macpherson Inquiry. [104164]

Mr. Straw: I have today published the Inspection Report and copies have been placed in the Library.

Posthumous Conception

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to amend the law relating to the registration of births of children conceived after the father's death; and if he will make a statement. [100620]

Yvette Cooper: I have been asked to reply.

The question as to whether a man can be named on a birth certificate as the father of a child conceived after the man's death is governed by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. Among other things the Act provides that where

> "the sperm of a man, or any embryo the creation of which was brought about with his sperm, was used after his death, he is not to be treated as the father of the child".

The legal status of children conceived using posthumous insemination was one of the issues considered by Professor Sheila McLean in the course of her "Review of the Common Law Provisions Relating to the Removal of Gametes and of the Consent Provisions in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990". Professor McLean recommended that consideration should be given to an amendment to the 1990 Act which would, in effect, permit the child to have a "legal" father where his sperm was used posthumously.

Professor McLean reported to Ministers in 1998 and we have since conducted a public consultation on the recommendations made in her report. We expect to be able to respond shortly to Professor McLean's recommendations, including our views on any possible amendments to the 1990 Act.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Table Tennis

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on potential conflicts of interest involving the Chairman of the English Table Tennis Association. [104170]

Kate Hoey: I am fully aware of the concerns which have been expressed in respect of the operation of the English Table Tennis Association (ETTA) and the role of its Chairman. These issues have been investigated by Sport England and the National Audit Office. As a result, the ETTA has taken a number of steps, including changes to its rules, committee structure and constitution, in order to prevent the risk of conflicts of interest arising and of members gaining unfair commercial advantage. In particular, it has set up a trade committee, upon which the Chairman does not sit, to deal with any business in which the chairman might have a commercial interest. The ETTA is also on the "watch list" of Sport England's Management Audit Department and is therefore subject to regular review and monitoring. This has indicated that all of the required operational procedures are being fully implemented by the ETTA. Sport England is also satisfied, having investigated a number of specific complaints, that there has been no misuse of public funds in respect of the ETTA. However, in view of the concerns which have been expressed in the past about the ETTA, the Chairman of Sport England has, at my request, agreed to carry out a further review of the progress being made towards the original recommendations made to the ETTA by the National Audit Office and Sport England. I have asked my officials to discuss the review with Sport England's Management Audit Department and report back to me as soon as it has been undertaken.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the finding of the Press Council on the English Table Tennis Association has been brought to his attention; and if he will make a statement. [104036]

Kate Hoey: I am aware that a complaint was made to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), the successor body to the Press Council, on behalf of Alan Ransome, Chairman of the English Table Tennis Association (ETTA) in relation to an article by John Goodbody in *The Times* on 14 December 1998. I have read the PCC's subsequent adjudication and they concluded that Mr. Ransome's complaints did not amount to a breach of the Code of Practice.

The Government do not generally comment on specific cases brought before the PCC. We remain of the belief that an effective voluntary Code of Practice for the print media, overseen by the PCC, is the best way of ensuring high editorial standards.

National Stadium

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the contracts between Sport England and Wembley National Stadium Ltd. relating to the development of the national stadium. [102420]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The Lottery Funding Agreement is the only contract between Sport England and Wembley National Stadium Ltd., and the Football Association is also party to that contract. Publication of the contract is primarily for the parties to the contract.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what meetings he *(a)* has had and *(b)* plans with members of the UK Athletics Technical Team who worked with Wembley National Stadium Ltd. on the design of the new National Stadium at Wembley. [103587]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* My right hon. Friend and I have met representatives of UK Athletics to discuss a wide range of issues relating to the National Stadium project. Neither of us, however, has met or plans to meet the UK Athletics Technical Team.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the value of the Government grant for the development of Wembley Stadium. [103754]

Kate Hoey: No direct Government funding has been provided for the development of Wembley Stadium. Sport England has made available a Lottery award of up to £120 million for the national stadium project.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much his Department paid DLA Ellerbe Beckett for producing their report on the new Wembley Stadium. [103588]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The report was commissioned by UK Sport from DLA Ellerbe Beckett at our request at a cost of £35,000.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will publish the correspondence between his Department and Sport England in relation to the redevelopment of Wembley Stadium. [102419]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* No. Much of the material contained in the correspondence was given on the understanding that it represented confidential communications between the Department and Sport England.

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the revised timetable for a decision on the rebuilding of Wembley Stadium. [102144]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced his decision on the rebuilding of Wembley Stadium on 22 December. A copy of that announcement has been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which of his Department's Ministers and officials attended the meeting of the National Stadium Monitoring Committee on 20 May. [103591]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the then Minister for Sport, and three officials from my Department attended the National Stadium Monitoring Committee meeting on 20 May 1999.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the dates and locations of the meetings of the National Stadium Monitoring Committee at which Ministers or officials of his Department were present. [103590]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* There have been three meetings of the National Stadium monitoring committee: on 17 February 1999 and 15 July 1999 at the DCMS offices; and on 20 May 1999 at the House of Commons.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many days interested parties were given to study the DLA Ellerbe Beckett report on the future of Wembley Stadium before he made his statement to the House of 1 December. [103592]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* We received the DLA: Ellerbe Beckett report on Monday 29 November and following consideration of its contents made it available on 1 December to interested parties shortly before the statement made in the House by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Cr[illegible]: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103845]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Comprehensive Spending Review last year resulted in a number of structural changes within the public bodies sponsored by DCMS, which will result in increased efficiency. At the same time, the Department took on a new, strategic role in its sectors, and a much higher profile in the regions, with dedicated staff in all Government regional offices. This was against the background of a running cost allocation which was flat over the three years of the financial settlement. Among specific initiatives designed to increase efficiency and effectiveness, we are rationalising our estate so that a greater proportion of staff are in one building; co-locating divisions to increase the capacity for sharing support services; and undertaking a number of reviews of our services as part of the Modernising Government agenda. We have established the Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team (Quest) in order to identify and spread good practice in administration across the Department's NDPBs.

Resorts Task Force

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the remit of the Resorts Task Force; who will serve on it; and how they will be appointed. [104277]

Janet Anderson: The English Tourism Council (ETC) is establishing a Resorts Task Force to tackle the problems facing resorts. It will include people with experience in tourism and, in particular, resorts, local government, planning, investment, design and economic development. Peter Moore, ETC board member and Managing Director of Center Parcs is chairing the Task Force and is currently assembling the team.

Civil Servants (Subsequent Employment)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he has made a ruling on whether an official whose name has been given to him has contravened the Civil Service rules relating to subsequent employment. [104037]

Mr. Chris Smith: No; my Department is in correspondence with the former official concerned.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102738]

Mr. Chris Smith: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office set out in her reply of 16 December, *Official Report*, column 264W, the corporate action that the Civil Service is taking to encourage the employment of people from ethnic minorities. My Department currently does only a limited amount of direct recruitment, but makes use of welcoming statements to encourage applications from under-represented groups. As part of the Department's commitment to provide a workplace free from discrimination, all staff receive equal opportunities awareness training and are encouraged to treat others with courtesy and respect. On 1 April 1999, 8 per cent. of the department's workforce declared themselves as being from an ethnic minority background. We will now be working closely with the Cabinet Office to widen the pool of potential recruits and increase interchange opportunities in order to increase the representation of ethnic minorities in DCMS.

International Sporting Events (Select Committee Report)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what further response he plans to make to the report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, "Staging Professional Sporting Events", HC (1998–99) 124; [103589]

(2) what action he has taken to implement the recommendations of the report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, "Staging International Sporting Events", HC (1998–99) 124. [103593]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The Government welcomed the extensive report of the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee into Staging International Sporting Events, and our response of 8 September stressed our full commitment to bringing major international sporting events to this country and to ensuring they are staged successfully. A key response to the recommendations directed at the Government was the appointment of the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), to a coordinating role across different Departments for the Government's interests in the successful delivery of the 2002 Commonwealth Games and associated activities. Also in hand are assessments of the impact of major events on participation in sport; assessment of the economic impact of major events; and improving the quality and contribution of British postholders in international governing bodies. Through UK Sport's major events strategy, we are continuing to work with all stakeholders to make Government support for events more effective.

SCOTLAND

Sexual Offences

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action he took before July in response to the report of the Scottish Office Central Research Unit in 1992 on sexual history and sexual character evidence in Scottish sexual offence trials. [103740]

Dr. Reid: The crimes of clandestine injury to women and incest were added in section 28 of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1995 to the categories of sexual offences in respect of which evidence of sexual character or sexual history would be inadmissible without the consent of the court. These were two crimes which the research report suggested should be within the scope of the legislation.

European Convention on Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the First Minister about additional training for *(a)* the police and *(b)* the Prison Service in Scotland since the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into United Kingdom domestic legislation. [103611]

Dr. Reid: Training of the police and Prison Service in Scotland is devolved and I have not discussed this issue with the First Minister.

Hughes Report (Dunblane)

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the availability of Inspector Hughes's report to the Cullen Inquiry into the Dunblane tragedy. [104011]

Dr. Reid: Sergeant Hughes's report was made available to the Cullen Inquiry as a production. The report contains sensitive information about children (not the children of Dunblane) who attended a summer camp run by Thomas Hamilton in 1991 and alleged offences against them. For these reasons it was considered appropriate that

the production should remain closed for 100 years with the Crown Office dealing with any requests for special access meantime.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Ashton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason the application from Axgro Foods of West Butterwick, near Gainsborough for regional selective assistance which was referred to him by the DTI, reference RSA/99/0116, for relocating their factory to Misterton Bassetlaw was rejected; for what reason the firm was informed at 4 p.m. on 20 December that they had to submit evidence by 22 December; and if he will make a statement. [104175]

Mr. Caborn: Axgro Foods Limited applied for a Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) grant on 25 November 1999. All RSA applications are considered against published criteria, which include conditions that grant can be made available only to projects that contribute positive benefits to both the regional and national economy. The European Community restricts assistance to some industries in which there is over-capacity. These restrictions apply to some fishery and agricultural products.

On 20 December the Government Office for the East Midlands, responsible for the appraisal of this case, contacted the company to advise that the application may be subject to EC restrictions. It asked the company to provide additional supporting information, which was received on 22 December.

An indicative offer of RSA was made to Axgro Foods Limited on 23 December, which is subject to a full appraisal and clarification on the issue of possible EC restrictions.

Assisted Areas (Food Production)

Mr. Ashton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assistance his Department provides for firms involved in food production who wish to relocate to constituencies which have assisted area status. [104174]

Mr. Caborn: Regional Selective Assistance is my Department's main instrument for offering direct financial assistance to companies investing in the Assisted Areas. It covers most manufacturing and some service industries, but some sectors including agricultural food production are subject to EU restrictions.

Copyright

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his Department's role in negotiations on the Internet caching aspects of the draft EU Directive on Copyright in the Information Society. [104081]

Dr. Howells: My Department's role is to consider the views of all interested parties on the mandatory exception to reproduction rights proposed in the draft Directive which is relevant to some kinds of caching, and to seek solutions in the negotiations on the Directive which are as fair as possible to all concerned. We wish to ensure both that the activities of service providers such as caching are not impeded, and also that owners of copyright and related rights are properly protected in the on-line environment.

Export Licences

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will provide details of licences granted to Sidem Ltd. for the export of small arms to Turkey since 2 May 1997. [104157]

Dr. Howells: The export of small arms is controlled under entries ML1 and PL5018 in the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended, commonly known as the Military List. The entry in the legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated, and no standard or open individual licences covering goods with the relevant ratings are recorded as having been issued to this company between 2 May 1997 and 3 January 2000 for the export to consignees or end-users in Turkey.

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 307–08W.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his Department is required to grant permission before a foreign company can export weapons manufactured under a licensed production agreement with a British company; and if he will list the actions taken *(a)* by his Department and *(b)* in conjunction with British Aerospace, to ensure that foreign companies manufacturing Heckler and Koch weapons using British Aerospace technology under licensed production agreements adhere to export control requirements within their licence agreements. [104295]

Dr. Howells: As I stated in answer to my hon. Friend on 22 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 117W, companies wishing to license overseas production of their products do not require DTI approval, nor are they required to notify DTI of arrangements entered into. The control of exports from another country of goods manufactured in that country under such an arrangement is a matter for the competent authorities of the Government concerned.

Furthermore, as stated previously, the issue of controls on licensed production overseas was raised in a number of the responses to the White Paper on Strategic Export Controls, and is therefore being considered in the review of the White Paper proposals in light of the results of the consultation.

Cash Machines (Charges)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the banking industry on advertising charges for the use of cash machines. [104285]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has corresponded with the British Bankers Association about charges for cash machines. My officials have also met representatives of Barclays Bank, the Nationwide Building Society and the British Bankers Association to discuss this issue.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to ensure clearing bank cash machines pre-notify customers of charges. [104284]

Dr. Howells: My Department is currently discussing the issue of charges for bank cash machines with the banking industry, HM Treasury and Don Cruickshank's team.

Our approach to this issue was set out by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 13 December 1999, *Official Report,* column 16W.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many clearing banks pre-notify charges for cash machine withdrawals. [104286]

Dr. Howells: I understand that banks generally inform their customers about such charges by letter or when cash cards are issued.

While some banks' cash machines give a general on-screen warning to the effect that a particular card issuer may levy a charge, I am not aware of any bank which indicates on-screen how much any charge will be.

World Trade Organisation

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry who represented Her Majesty's Government at the meeting of the General Council of the WTO held in Geneva on Friday 17 December. [104105]

Mr. Caborn: The Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom Mission in Geneva attended the meeting of the WTO General Council. However, it is the European Commission that represents and speaks on behalf of the European Union and its member states at meetings of the WTO General Council.

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the minutes of the meeting of the General Council of the WTO held in Geneva on Friday 17 December will be published. [104106]

Mr. Caborn: The minutes will be circulated to WTO members in January. They will be made available to the public by the WTO secretariat eight months after circulation in accordance with a WTO General Council decision dated 26 July 1996. We are pressing in the WTO, through the European Union, for an elimination of the delay between initial circulation and derestriction as part of our broader WTO transparency aims.

Objective 1 Funding

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what level of match public funds from (a) his Department and (b) the Department for Education and Employment are available to EU Objective 1 regions for each of the next seven calendar years. [104306]

Mr. Caborn: It is not possible to identify match funding from DTI sources for the next seven calendar years since the Department's current expenditure plan runs until the end of the financial year 2000–01. Spending for following years will be determined as part of the next spending review. The DTI has many programmes which may provide match funding in Objective 1 regions, eg Business Links, Foresight, Smart, LINK. Regional Government Offices can advise potential applicants for European structural funding on all of these.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the requirements for match public funds from his Department for the EU Objective 1 regions of *(a)* Cornwall and Scilly, *(b)* Merseyside and *(c)* South Yorkshire for each of the seven years of the programme. [104351]

Mr. Caborn: I refer the hon. Member to answer given on 10 November 1999, *Official Report,* column 637W.

Responsibility for identifying match funding is a matter for the partnerships in the regions concerned.

The Government decided two years ago on the levels of public spending for all departments for a three-year period. We shall review spending plans and bids in the next spending review for the period 2001–04.

The Regional Government Offices are best placed to advise the partnerships on the sources of departmental funding which can be used to match Structural Funds. The Government is updating and improving guidance on match funding. Given that UK annual public expenditure on industry, agriculture and employment alone is around ten times as much as annual commitments from the structural funds, there should be no difficulty for projects in finding match funding.

Post Office

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if Parcelforce will continue to have preferential customs clearance facilities following the implementation of the Post Office White Paper proposals. [104250]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There are no plans to make changes to Post Office customs procedures in the forthcoming Post Office Bill. Customs are in discussion with Parcelforce concerning international clearance facilities at their new Coventry depot.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if Parcelforce's compulsory purchase powers will be retained following the implementation of the Post Office White Paper. [104249]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is intended that these powers will be retained by the Post Office but extended to other licensed Universal Service Providers.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what progress the Post Office has made in implementing the cost-based accounting system proposed in the Post Office White Paper; [104179]

(2) what assessment he has made of progress made by the Post Office towards meeting the February 2000 deadline for the implementation of transparent accounting. [104178]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Post Office is making good progress in implementing the necessary cost-based accounting systems and it is expected that the EC Directive 97/67 deadline requirements for transparent accounting will be met.

Stamps

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* first class stamps and *(b)* second class stamps were sold in (i) 1995, (ii) 1996, (iii) 1997 and (iv) 1998. [104251]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that it is not possible to record the numbers of first and second class stamps sold because stamps are sold through independent retailers as well as through the Post Office network. The Post Office have supplied the following figures for the numbers of first and second class stamps produced:

Billion

Year	*First class*	*Second class*
1995–96	2.4	1.9
1996–97	2.7	2.1
1997–98	2.5	2.1
1998–99	2.2	2.2

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what account he took of EU proposals for a reduction in the postal monopoly when approving the increase in price of the first class stamp. [104182]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Post Office have referred their proposals for letter tariff increases to the Post Office Users' National Council for consultation as statutorily required. My right hon. Friend will consider in due course any views and comments received from the Council.

Postal Services Commission

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria will be used to appoint members of the Postal Services Commission. [104180]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The criteria for members of the Postal Services Commission are set out in the advertisements for those posts and the information for candidates sent to those expressing an interest. Copies of these are being placed in the Library of the House.

Ilisu Dam

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations Her Majesty's Government have received in relation to the proposed Ilisu Dam from *(a)* Syria, *(b)* Iraq and *(c)* other Middle Eastern countries. [104071]

Mr. Caborn: Syria raised the issue with our Embassy in Damascus in March 1999. They have also raised it on one occasion with British Trade International and most recently (on 23 December) when the Syrian Ambassador called on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

There have been no representations from Iraq.

The League of Arab States has also informally raised the issue by telephone with the Export Credits Guarantee Department.

Oil and Gas Production

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his Department's policy towards oil and gas companies which hold fallow fields in the United Kingdom Continental Shelf. [103112]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The Department's Oil and Gas policy is to encourage exploration and development on the UKCS whilst allowing licence groups the option of which discoveries are brought to development. They are encouraged to relinquish any acreage considered unprospective or non-commercial. A review of fallow blocks and discoveries is currently under way.

The Oil and Gas Industry Task Force has established LIFT (Licence Information for Trading), an on-line information service which allows licensees to advertise licences and assets for sale, trade or form-in. LIFT will encourage more asset trading, by enabling companies to realise their value in a cost-effective way.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100155]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The information for the Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Departments is contained in a table, a copy of which has been placed in the Library. This covers the period up to the date of devolution.

Robert Hamill

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at what time on 27 April 1997 the location of the fatal attack on Robert Hamill in Portadown was cordoned off by Royal Ulster Constabulary officers. [101856]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 8 December 1999]:* The RUC have advised that the scene was cordoned off at 07.27 hours on 27 April 1997.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at what times on 27 April 1997 the Royal Ulster Constabulary officers who were present at the scene of the fatal attack on Robert Hamill in Portadown signed written statements regarding the incident. [101857]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 8 December 1999]:* The RUC have advised that the actual times at which police officers signed written statements regarding the fatal attack on Robert Hamill are not recorded. However, they have confirmed that all statements were made during the morning of 27 April.

Seamus Ludlow

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make available to the Irish

judicial investigation into the 1976 murder of Seamus Ludlow *(a)* the interview notes made by the RUC relating to men arrested but not charged in 1999 and *(b)* case papers prepared for the DPP. [101872]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* To date there has been no request for such information. Should one be received it will be considered in accordance with procedures, regulations and legal constraints.

Security Patrols

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many patrols were carried out in the last month for which figures are available, broken down by *(a)* police division and *(b)* corresponding district council constituency areas, indicating which of those patrols were accompanied by a military presence. [101878]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* The following table shows the number of RUC patrols accompanied by the armed forces during the month of November 1999. It is not possible to provide the total number of RUC patrols or to relate these to district council areas.

RUC accompanied by military patrols—November 1999

Division	*Number of accompanied patrols*
A	0
B	0
D	0
E	0
G	20
H	402
J	102
K	157
L	383
N	6
O	5
P	22

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what figures he can require from local authorities about the composition of their work forces in terms of *(a)* standard age groups, *(b)* ethnic origins and *(c)* gender. [104012]

Mr. Mandelson: Responsibility for this subject has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is therefore no longer a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Patten Commission

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the Patten Commission's report on policing in Northern Ireland. [103958]

Mr. Ingram: On 9 September 1999 the Patten Commission issued their report and the Secretary of State announced that the Government accepted their findings in principle. A copy of this statement has been placed in the Library of the House. As required by the Belfast Agreement, the Government consulted with various parties. Although the formal period of consultation ended on 30 November 1999, decisions have not yet been made on the proposals. It is the Secretary of State's intention that an announcement on Government decisions taken in light of the consultation process, and the next steps, will be made in due course.

Royal Ulster Constabulary (Kosovo)

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the role played by the Royal Ulster Constabulary in Kosovo and Bosnia. [103725]

Mr. Ingram: In accordance with the provisions of Section 8 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, the Royal Ulster Constabulary have seven officers serving with the United Nations International Police Task Force in Bosnia where they are monitoring the performance of the Bosnian police service. Sixty RUC officers are also with the United Nations Mission in Kosovo where they are undertaking an executive policing role pending a new Kosovan police service being trained and ready to take over law enforcement there.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103853]

Mr. Mandelson: My Department is fully committed to seeking efficiency savings and living within agreed budgets. It is determined to achieve efficiencies in all areas of activity and reductions in support services where possible. A comprehensive review of running costs was completed during 1999 and its recommendations for savings, mainly in support services, are being assessed and implemented. More generally, efficiency plans are an integral plan of annual plans for all parts of the Department.

The Northern Ireland Office will play a full part in taking forward the Government's plans for modernising the delivery of services and reforming the Civil Service. In line with these initiatives it is preparing a programme for Better Quality Services Review over the next five years, to include quinquennial reviews of its agencies and non-departmental public bodies, which will seek to identify the most effective and economical ways to deliver its services. It has already begun action to improve procurement arrangements, to reduce sickness absences, to guard against fraud and to increase the use of electronic business with the Department.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Asylum Appeals

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average waiting time in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999 for (i) a hearing and (ii) a decision in respect of appeals against asylum decisions. [104043]

Jane Kennedy: The Immigration Appellate Authority has been unable to monitor the average waiting time for a decision in respect of appeals against asylum decisions. The following table details the average waiting times for a hearing.

Category of hearing	1998	1999
Certified	11	5
Substantive	26	6
Detained	4	4

Note:
Average waiting time shown in weeks

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many asylum seekers are currently awaiting the *(a)* hearing and *(b)* outcome of a hearing of an appeal against an initial refusal of their claim for asylum. [104046]

Jane Kennedy: The Immigration Appellate Authority does not hold separate statistics for these two categories. There were a total of 4,327 asylum appeals outstanding before adjudicators as at 31 December 1999.

There are in addition, 2,245 asylum appeals outstanding before the Tribunal as at 31 December.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many appeals against initial asylum decisions were heard in *(a)* 1998 and *(b)* 1999. [104044]

Jane Kennedy: The number of asylum appeals determined by adjudicators in *(a)* 1998 was 25,322 and in *(b)* 1999 was 19,461.

Either-way Cases

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what has been the average time taken from first hearing to verdict in contested cases triable either way which were tried in the magistrates' court, for each of the last five years where data is available. [R] [104233]

Jane Kennedy: Information on the time taken in magistrates courts proceedings is collected by the Lord Chancellor's Department's Time Intervals Survey. The survey collects data on indictable (including triable either way) cases completed in a sample week of each February, June and October. During 2000 the frequency of the survey will increase to four times a year. The survey records the date of the first listing but does not record the date of the first hearing.

The average time taken from first listing to verdict for defendants in contested triable either way cases which were tried in magistrates courts was 113 days in February 1999 and 104 days in June 1999.

These figures use information collected for the first time in 1999 following an enhancement to the survey. Equivalent figures for previous years are not available.

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what has been the average time taken from first hearing to transfer in contested cases triable either way, except those prosecuted by the Serious Fraud Office, which were transferred to the Crown court in each of the last five years where data are available; [R] [104234]

(2) what has been the average time taken from first hearing to verdict in contested cases triable either way, except those prosecuted by the Serious Fraud Office, which were transferred to the Crown court, in each of the last five years where data are available. [R] [104235]

Jane Kennedy: The information requested is not available. Cases involving notices of transfer to the Crown court under section 53 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 cannot be separately identified in the data collected on time taken in court proceedings.

European Convention on Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what additional training the judiciary in *(a)* Northern Ireland and *(b)* Scotland have been given since the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into United Kingdom domestic legislation. [103610]

Mr. Lock: *(a)* The Judicial Studies Board for Northern Ireland has held five lectures on several European Convention on Human Rights topics since February 1998. In mid-January 2000 there will be a further Human Rights Act lecture, followed in late January, February and March by three case study events covering civil law, family law and criminal law respectively. In addition, the Board is presently considering possible topics for inclusion in a series of Human Rights Act lectures and has secured the agreement of Judge Nicolas Bratza, the British judge at the European Court of Human Rights, to deliver the Board's 2000 Annual Address.

(b) This is a matter for the Scottish Executive.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Internet

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those primary and secondary schools and further education colleges in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire which have given students access to the Internet since 1 May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [102460]

Mr. Wills: There are no centrally held statistics of school connection to the Internet by MP's constituency area. Figures are available for schools in England and are shown in the following table:

Percentage of schools connected to the Internet

Year	Primary	Secondary
1997	5	47
1998	17	83
1999	62	93

All colleges of further education have internet connections.

Information provided by Shropshire Local Education Authority indicates that all secondary schools currently have access to the Internet and that the 100 primary schools remaining are due to be connected to the Internet by the end of March 2000.

Sure Start

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the *(a)* mean and *(b)* median time taken for the approval of those Sure Start applications that have been approved. [103026]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* Of the 15 local Sure Start programmes approved to date, the mean time taken to approve them from receipt of final delivery plans was eight weeks. The median time was also eight weeks. This included time spent consulting relevant departments centrally and regionally and seeking further information from some local programmes.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what are the start point data on *(a)* low birth weight and *(b)* hospital admissions as a result of serious injury, for each approved Sure Start application. [103006]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The following table shows the start point data for *(a)* low birth weight babies and *(b)* hospital admissions as a result of serious injury, gastro-enteritis or a respiratory infection, for the 15 Sure Start programmes approved to date.

16 Sure Start programmes announced at 15 December 1999	*Start-point data on low birth weight babies less than 2,500g (unless stated)*	*Admissions to hospital as an emergency during their first year of life with gastro-enteritis, a respiratory infection or a severe injury*
Birmingham	11%	[1]—
Blackpool	8 babies	[1]—
Bristol	7.28%	[1]—
Copeland	6.5%	[1]—
Derby	62 babies	Gastro-enteritis 7, Respiratory infection 19, Severe injury 8 (including one death)
Hastings	6%	Aged 0–4 years: Gastro-enteritis 23, Respiratory infection 40, Injury (including poisoning) 20
Leicester	2.6% (less than 1,500 g)	[1]—
Manchester	9%	[1]—
Mansfield	12 babies	[1]—
North Tyneside	17.8%	131 admissions to hospital (excluding asthma), 84 for accidental injury and a further 72 seen at A&E for minor ailments
Oldham	8.2%	[1]—
Oxford	10 babies	[1]—
Sheffield	[1]—	[1]—
Sunderland	4.48%	Respiratory infection 36, (diagnosis codes J00-J99), Gastro-enteritis 3 (diagnosis codes A084 & A09), Severe injury 0 (diagnosis codes S00-T98 plus a stay of 2 plus days)
Thurrock	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Will be collected by April 2000

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many of the 60 Sure Start areas correspond to *(a)* electoral wards and *(b)* local authority areas. [103005]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* Sure Start areas are very much smaller than local authority areas. The majority of Sure Start areas do not correspond to electoral wards, though some do, with others covering a number of wards. We are in the process of mapping the Sure Start areas in a Geographical Information System which will permit a precise answer to this question.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how each of the 14 indices is weighted when calculating the index of deprivation used in assessing need for Sure Start areas. [103002]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The Index of Local Deprivation contains 12 indicators, to which two further indicators, low birth weight babies and births to teenage mothers, were added specifically for the purpose of identifying Sure Start districts. All 14 indicators are afforded equal weight in calculating the overall index.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of the population of England is covered by the 60 Sure Start areas announced to date. [102199]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* It is estimated that 1.8 per cent. of the population of England is covered by the 60 Sure Start areas announced to date.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of the population of England will be covered by Sure Start areas by March 2002. [102198]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* There will be 250 local Sure Start programmes in place by March 2002. Assuming these are of similar size to the 60 trailblazers, it is estimated that 7.5 per cent. of the population of England will be covered by Sure Start areas by March 2002.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the size of each grant awarded to each Sure Start area. [102200]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The total amount of grant currently allocated for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 is £66,205,685. I have placed a breakdown by programme in the Library.

Departmental Research Contracts

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many research contracts have been let by his Department since May 1997; what is the value of each contract; and in each case whether the contract included *(a)* a departmental veto over publication of the research results, *(b)* departmental control over the date of publication of the research results and *(c)* a requirement that the final research results incorporate departmental amendments. [100145]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* Full details of the Department's research contracts and their value are presented in the Department's Annual Report on Research. The 1997 and 1998 Annual Reports are lodged with the House of Commons' Library. The 1999 report will be published shortly. In the absence of this, a list of research contracted since May 1997 is attached.

The results of research are routinely published in line with the requirements of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. The Department aims to publish or release for publication at least 80 per cent. of research reports within 16 weeks of receiving a final draft from its contractors.

There is no veto over publication of the findings and Ministers are informed of intentions to publish. Contractors are not required to incorporate Departmental amendments. The wording of DfEE research contracts was revised in October 1998 to make this point clearer to contractors.

Quigley Report

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Quigley report on student finance will be published. [104151]

Mr. Wicks: The Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 requires that report to be laid before each House of Parliament not later than 1 April 2000.

Voluntary Aided Schools (Hendon)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which voluntary aided schools in Hendon have received additional capital allocations; for what purpose; and how much, in each case, since 1 May 1997. [103030]

Jacqui Smith: On 1 May 1997, there were 12 Voluntary Aided (VA) schools in the constituency of Hendon and the following table lists the schools that have received approval for new capital work since that date.

£

School name	*Project description*	*Date approved*	*Total*[1]
The Annunciation RC Infant	New windows	July 1997	11,999
	New entrance	July 1997	12,997
	Window and door replacement	May 1998	13,141
	Work to entrance	May 1998	13,159
The Blessed Dominic RC Primary	Library accommodation	October 1999	21,963
	Work to covered link	May 1997	1,703
Hasmonean Primary	Replace dilapidated buildings	January 1999	480,000
Independent Jewish Day	Classroom extension	June 1999	162,282
	Replacement fire escape	March 1998	2,761
	Work to covered link	July 1998	12,923
St. John's CE Infant	External work	June 1999	12,220
St. Joseph's RC Infant	New windows	May 1999	17,068
St. Joseph's RC Junior	Toilets (NDS)	October 1997	16,441
	New windows	May 1999	73,379
	Office improvements	November 1997	4,879
St. Mary's CE Junior	Roof renewal	April 1999	121,645
	Work to cavity trays	August 1997	2,181

£

School name	Project description	Date approved	Total [1]
St. Paul's CE Primary	External handrail	July 1998	8,272
	Infants WC and cloakroom	April 1998	13,269
	Security fencing	August 1997	13,511
	New windows	June 1997	8,258
St. Vincent's RC Primary	Infants toilets	August 1998	13,000
	Single site consolidation	January 1999	1,819,035

[1] Figures represent 100 per cent. of governor's costs. Actual grant paid will be at 85 per cent. of the sums shown

Formula capital grant for all schools will be introduced on 1 April 2000. VA schools in Hendon, including the five former GM schools which joined the VA sector on 1 September 1999, will receive formula capital allocations totalling £134,839 for 2000–01.

Personal and Social Education

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his policy on the teaching of *(a)* six to 11-year-olds and *(b)* 11 to 16-year-olds about homosexuality as part of personal and social education. [103338]

Jacqui Smith: The Government have now published a new framework for PSHE designed to help pupils develop into confident, healthy and responsible individuals and help them to deal with difficult moral and social questions that arise in their lives and in society, including addressing issues such as homophobic bullying. The Government support teaching through this framework.

Gamma Hydroxy Butyrate

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he has taken to raise awareness of the dangers of gamma hydroxy butyrate in schools. [103378]

Jacqui Smith: Drug education is a statutory requirement at all key stages of National Curriculum science. The detailed content and organisation of drug education programmes is a matter for individual schools, geared to the specific local needs and circumstances of their pupils, and should include all drugs and substances open to misuse, including gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB).

To support the Anti-Drugs Strategy, our national framework for PSHE will set drug education within a broader context of personal and social development, which will help to equip young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to resist pressure to misuse drugs.

Age Diversity

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to publish the initial survey of employers and older people carried out prior to the publication of the Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment. [103905]

Ms Hodge: The initial survey was carried out to provide a baseline against which findings from the subsequent surveys could be measured. We intend, therefore, to publish the baseline information in the Spring alongside the findings from the second wave survey.

Disability Discrimination Act

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement concerning the operation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in relation to the responsibilities of financial institutions when providing services. [102939]

Ms Hodge: The Disability Discrimination Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people by treating them less favourably than people who are not disabled, or by failing to make reasonable adjustments when services are impossible or unreasonably difficult to use. Financial institutions have the same responsibilities under the Act as other providers of services to the public. The Code of Practice which we published on 29 June 1999 explains these duties and gives practical guidance on how to prevent discrimination against disabled people. The British Bankers' Association (BBA) has also published its own guidance—"implementing Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act: BBA guidance on banks' responsibilities to their customers from October 1999"—with examples specific to the banking sector. It has also published a leaflet for customers entitled "The New Disability Legislation: What You Can Expect from Your Bank".

Child Care

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many net child care places have been created in the first two quarters of the financial year 1999–2000 by the early years development and childcare partnerships in (i) the parliamentary constituency of Birkenhead, (ii) the four parliamentary constituencies of the Wirral, (iii) the parliamentary constituencies of the City of Liverpool and (iv) the parliamentary constituencies of Merseyside. [104227]

Ms Hodge: The number of net child care places created are as follows:

Constituencies	Number of net places
Birkenhead	[1]19
Wirral	349
City of Liverpool	278
Merseyside	855

[1] The figure for Birkenhead does not include childminder places as these are not broken down to constituency level, but a proportion of the 138 childminder places created in the Wirral area will be in the constituency of Birkenhead.

School Building

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many school building projects in

England are currently being funded through public private sector partnerships; and what is his forecast for the number of new projects to be started in 2000–01. [104172]

Jacqui Smith: Contracts have been awarded on eight schools' projects in England under the Private Finance Initiative, six of which are for building projects covering new or replacement single schools and two of which are Local Education Authority (LEA) wide service contracts. A further 34 projects, covering both single schools and groups of schools, have been approved by the Treasury's Project Review Group (PRG), 13 of which will receive support in 2000–01. In addition, 15 LEAs have been invited to submit business cases for projects, covering both single schools and groups of schools, to be considered for support at future PRG meetings.

A total of £1.3 billion of PFI Credits has been provided for schools' projects in England up to 31 March 2002, including the £100 million announced in the pre-Budget statement.

A further 16 Public Private Partnerships (PPP) are currently being supported by £10 million of New Deal for Schools (NDS) grant. PPPs to be supported through NDS grant in 2000–01 and 2001–02 will be announced in the Spring.

In total, over 700 schools will have benefited from different forms of PPPs by 31 March 2002.

National Curriculum (Disapplied Pupils)

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to exclude disapplied pupils from the total number when calculating the percentage of pupils achieving specific levels on the National Curriculum assessments. [104262]

Jacqui Smith: We have no such plans. The National Targets enshrine our determination to improve educational standards among all children. Published figures on the performance of our schools and of the country as a whole reflect that by showing the progress of all pupils through the National Curriculum attainment levels.

The National Curriculum tests are designed to be accessible to the vast majority of children. With the range of special arrangements for assessment available to schools only a very small number of children are unable to participate in the tests. There is also a real danger that excluding disapplied pupils from the calculations could by itself lead to an undesirable increase in the number of children excluded from the National Curriculum and its assessment. Our policy is supported by the National Advisory Group on Special Educational Needs.

Access-to-work Scheme

Mr. Berry: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what is the total budget allocated for informing disabled people and employers about the access-to-work scheme; and what the breakdown of that expenditure is; [103356]

(2) if his Department has produced a marketing strategy for the access-to-work scheme; [103357]

(3) what is the total budget allocated for advertising the access to work scheme; and what is the level of expenditure allocated to advertising on *(a)* radio, *(b)* television, *(c)* newspapers and *(d)* journals and trade magazines. [103358]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of these questions has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mr. Leigh Lewis to Mr. Roger Berry, dated 10 January 2000:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply direct to your questions about the Access to Work programme. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

For the current financial year, we have allocated £450,000 to marketing and promoting the full range of our services for disabled people and their employers. This includes Access to Work, although we do not reserve a specific amount within that total for Access to Work. We carefully consider advertising options but do not allocate specific amounts to advertising on radio, television, newspapers or journals and trade magazines. We are spending £350,000 of the budget on national promotions and the rest is being spent to promote disability programmes and services at regional and local level.

Our publicity strategy is to raise awareness of the whole range of support available to disabled people and their employers from our disability services. Thus we generally market these services collectively to give a coherent picture of the support available. We produce, for example, leaflets, audio tapes, videos, posters, advertisements and articles for publication in a range of general and specific disability journals. All such generic advertising includes information on the Access to Work programme. For example, in March 1999, we worked closely with the British Deaf Association to produce a British Sign Language video—Make it Work—about our programmes and services. We used three case studies in the video, two of which specifically promoted Access to Work. We have distributed the video to every Jobcentre and to 1,000 external organisations including clubs, organisations and collages for deaf and hearing impaired people.

The leaflets we produce are freely available from Jobcentres, Disability Service Teams and at marketing events, and we produce them in alternative formats. There are specific leaflets for disabled people and employers promoting Access to Work. Disability Employment Advisers use these leaflets on visits to employers to ensure they are aware of Access to Work.

We also promote our services, including Access to Work, at many national, regional and local marketing events. For example, we have recently held promotions at the Institute of Personnel and Development Conference and Exhibition, the Confederation of British Industry Conference, and the Access Ability, National Information Day. Access to Work was the central theme of the two employment workshops at the Access Ability event.

In addition to our own promotions, the Government's current "See the Person" campaign is designed to raise awareness of the positive contribution disabled people are able to make. The campaign refers directly to the support Access to Work can provide to those in work.

I hope this is helpful.

University Fees

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy to charge university students in the nations of the United Kingdom by different means dependent on *(a)* their university location, *(b)* the place they have (i) lived in and (ii) studied at and *(c)* the place of their birth. [104309]

Mr. Wicks: The Secretary of State is responsible for the funding of Higher Education in England and Wales. Students currently pay fees of up to £1,025 depending on an assessment of their financial circumstances. These arrangements are fair, just and equitable.

Pre-school Education

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will add Northumberland to the list of authorities with high social need to which funding is provided for new pre-school education places for three-year-olds. [103476]

Ms Hodge: We are making available £390 million over three years to double the number of three-year-olds able to access a free early education place to 66 per cent. This year we are making available £40 million to create around 48,000 new free places. This has been allocated to 57 local education authorities with the greatest social need. From April 2000, we will be providing a further £100 million to increase the number of new places to 83,000. These funds will be distributed across all local education authorities, including Northumberland.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103846]

Mr. Wills: Delivering efficient and modern public services is a key part of the Government's agenda for improving productivity, and improved administrative efficiency is a key means of ensuring the most effective results are obtained from departmental running costs. The Department's Public Service Agreement, which is available in the Library of the House within "Public Services for the Future: Modernisation, Reform, Accountability" (CM 4181), sets out its running costs provision for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 and the productivity measures that will enable it to increase the quantity and quality of its outputs over that period. Revised targets are being drawn up for a new Public Service Agreement and supporting Service Delivery Agreement that will be published after the completion of the 2000 Spending Review.

School Closures

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the name of the adjudicator appointed to consider the disputed closure proposals for Milfield, Kirknewton and Acklington schools in Northumberland will be announced; by what date representations relating to these closure proposals need to be submitted; and whether arrangements will be made for the Adjudicator to visit the areas served by the schools. [103475]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Office of the Schools Adjudicator has today received objections to the proposed closure of Milfield, Kirknewton and Acklington schools in Northumberland. Any representations should already have been sent to Northumberland LEA. The Adjudicator allocated to deal with the case is Dr. Alan Billings.

Rural Youth Employment

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he is taking to tackle youth employment in the countryside. [103194]

Ms Jowell: The Department's policies are generally individual focused and would therefore respond to need wherever it exists. We are raising standards of education to equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need to be able to take up jobs; assisting unemployed young people to acquire employability skills and find work through the New Deals for unemployed claimants; and helping those on inactivity benefits get back into the labour market and from there into employment through other welfare to work programmes such as the New Deal for Lone Parents.

As well as these, the Government are delivering macroeconomic stability so there can be increasing employment opportunities for all; and making work pay through various tax and benefit reforms.

All these measures should contribute to reducing youth unemployment in the countryside.

New Deal (Age Restrictions)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans to modify age restrictions under the New Deal, indicating the date from which all changes will take effect and the categories of restrictions which will remain after limiting the payment of £10 per person per week above benefit levels for unemployed people taking up job opportunities on such schemes. [103299]

Ms Jowell: From April 2001, we intend to introduce a substantially strengthened New Deal for long-term unemployed people aged 25 and over, which will provide high quality, job-focused opportunities, including job search help, training and work experience. The detail of these arrangements will be decided in light of the lessons learned from the current New Deal 25 plus pilots. We are also reviewing the support available in England under work-based learning for adults to ensure that we meet the aim set out in the White Paper, "Learning to Succeed", that there should be greater coherence with other support for unemployed people, once responsibility has transferred to the Employment Service in April 2001. A similar review is being undertaken in Wales.

New Deal

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people have participated in the New Deal in each region of the United Kingdom in the *(a)* current and *(b)* last year. [101301]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* The following table shows the number of young people who have started New Deal in each of the Employment Service regions in Great Britain. New Deal started in January 1998 in the first 12 Pathfinder areas, followed by the main roll out across Great Britain in April 1998. The 1999 figures are to the end of September.

	1998	1999
Office for Scotland	22,617	17,095
Northern	16,073	11,010
North West	30,728	20,704
Yorkshire and Humber	25,783	16,802
Office for Wales	13,615	9,310
West Midlands	20,501	15,600
East Midlands and Eastern	17,913	12,782
South West	12,607	9,191
LASER	52,992	36,334
Great Britain total	212,829	148,828

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the independent expert studies which he has commissioned into each of the New Deal programmes. [102102]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* We have an independent programme of evaluations of the New Deals. The independent studies which have been commissioned into each of the New Deal programmes are as follows:

Evaluation studies	*Independent contractor*
New Deal for young people	
1. Qualitative Research with individuals:	
(i) Pathfinder Gateway (ii) Pathfinder Options (iii) Pathfinder Follow-Through (iv) National Gateway (v) National Options (vi) National Follow-Through	National Centre for Social Research (NSCR)
2. Quantitative Survey of individuals: Stages 1 and 2	Policy Studies Institute/British Market Research Bureau
3. Case Studies of Delivery and Impact	Tavistock Institute
(i) Pathfinder Case Studies	
(ii) National Case Studies	
(iii) Audit of 30 Partnerships	
4. Qualitative Research with employers Stages 1 and 2	NCSR
5. Quantitative Survey of employers	NCSR/Institute for Employment Research (IER)
6. Survey of Leavers to Unknown Destinations	NCSR
7. Evaluation of Intensive Gateway Trailblazers	Ecotec
8. Evaluation of New Deal for Musicians	Community Economic Development Associates
9. New Deal Gateway: A Labour Market Assessment	Institute for Employment Studies (IES)
10. Literature Review: Employers	Institute for Employment Research (IER)
11. Literature Review: Labour Market Programmes for Young People	Policy Studies Institute (PSI)
12. Macro-economic evaluation of the impact of NDYP on the labour market	PSI and the National Institute for Economic and Social Research (NIESR)
New Deal for the Long Term Unemployed	
1. Quantitative Survey of individuals receiving pilot and national provision	PSI
2. Qualitative research with individuals in pilot and national areas	NCSR
3. Case Studies of implementation and delivery in national areas	Tavistock Institute
4. Case Studies of implementation and delivery in pilot areas	IES
5. Quantitative survey of participating employers in pilot and national areas	NCSR/IER
6. A macro-economic evaluation of the impact of NDLTU on the labour market	NIESR and PSI
New Deal 50plus	
An extensive programme of research has been commissioned to assess the effectiveness of New Deal 50plus. It includes qualitative work with individuals and with Employment Service and Benefits Agency employees, a longitudinal survey of individuals and a qualitative survey of employers. All the work is being carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES).	
New Deal for Lone Parents	
NDLP National Programme (Phase 3) Evaluation	
(i) Qualitative research with Lone Parents	Cragg, Ross, Dawson
(ii) Client Satisfaction Survey	Martin Hamblin Research
(iii) Case Studies on Delivery	GHK Economics and Management
(iv) Employer Research	NCSR
(v) Quantitative research with lone parents	(contractor to be confirmed)
(vi) Macro-evaluation	(contractor to be confirmed)
NDLP Phase 3 Innovative Pilots Evaluation	
(i) Evaluation of Innovative Pilots	Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) Sheffield Hallam University
New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed	
No contractors have yet been appointed for the evaluations of New Deal for Partners of the Unemployed (voluntary programme) or for NDPU Joint Claims for JSA.	

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many long-term unemployed people who have entered the New Deal have found full-time employment in each of the past two years. [101311]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* In 1998, 62,900 young people gained employment from the New Deal for young people and 6,300 under the New Deal for long-term unemployed people aged 25 and over. To September 1999, the equivalent figures for this year are 92,700 and 20,500 respectively.

Professor Barber

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment on what date Professor

Barber gave a presentation to a group of officials in the Education Department in Washington DC; and what were the names of the officials who attended. [103140]

Ms Estelle Morris: Professor Barber gave a presentation to a group of officials from the Education Department in Washington DC on 11 August 1999. The seminar, which was organised by Emma Harrell on behalf of Terry Peterson, Counselor to the Secretary of Education, allowed an informal, round-table exchange of ideas with officials from the US Department of Education. Roughly 12–15 officials attended. No formal record of attendance was kept but those invited were:

Michael Smith—Acting Deputy Secretary of Education

Michael Cohen—Senior Advisor to the Secretary of Education

Susan Frost—Special Advisor to the Secretary, Office of the Secretary

Terry Dozier—Special Advisor on Teaching, Office of the Secretary

Carol Rasco—Senior Advisor to the Secretary and Director of America Reads Challenge, Office of the Secretary

Judith Johnson—Acting Assistant Secretary, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

Kent McGuire—Assistant Secretary, Office of Educational Research and Improvement

Alan Ginsburg—Planning and Evaluation Service Director, Office of the Secretary

William Kincaid—Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

Jim Kohlmoos—Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

Susan Wilhelm—Education Program Specialist, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

Patricia McNeil—Assistant Secretary, Office of Vocational Adult Education

Linda Roberts—Director of Education Technology, Office of the Deputy Secretary

Mario Moreno—Assistant Secretary, Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs

Menahem Herman—Partnership for Family Involvement in Education Coordinator, Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs

Judith Heumann—Assistant Secretary, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

Lenore Garcia—International Affairs Director, Office of the Under Secretary.

If we are to create a truly world-class education service, it is vital that we have a broad international perspective against which to benchmark our levels of achievement. It is important to keep in touch with, and learn from, best practice and innovations from abroad. The USA, because of its size and diversity, provides many instructive examples.

HEALTH

Departmental Transport

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department has spent on ministerial transport in each of the last two years. [98694]

Yvette Cooper: In accordance with the terms of the "Ministerial Code" and "Travel by Ministers", Ministers are required to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. For Ministers in the Department, this is done through the Government Car Service.

For information on spend on the Government Car Service, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 199–200W.

Meningitis Immunisation

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to extend immunisation against meningitis to young people on industrial placements prior to university entry. [98725]

Yvette Cooper: While on placements, the risk for these young people from meningococcal disease is the same as for the adult population. Next year, when they either return or go on to higher education, they may be eligible for immunisation. We are seeking advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, the Government's independent expert advisory committee, on the use of meningococcal vaccine for young people who have not already been vaccinated at school and who will be first year students at the start of the 2000–01 academic year.

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children have been immunised with the meningitis vaccine since the current immunisation programme was introduced. [100605]

Yvette Cooper: Data on how many children have been given the new meningococcal Group C conjugate vaccine are not yet available.

Immunisation of young people aged 15, 16 and 17 years began from 1 November. Immunisation of babies when they are due for their routine vaccines at two, three and four months and around 13 months began from 29 November. Coverage data for meningococcal Group C conjugate vaccine will be collected through the routine quarterly COVER/Körner returns for children up to five years of age. The earliest these routinely collected data will become available will be November 2000, but we expect coverage data on some other catch-up age groups to be available earlier. The exact timescale will depend on vaccine supply and how the immunisation programme rolls out next year.

From the start of the programme up to and including Friday 26 November, a total of 1,734,560 doses of meningococcal Group C conjugate vaccine had been issued to general practitioners or National Health Service trust pharmacies throughout the United Kingdom.

Nutrition

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which officials in his Department have overall responsibility for malnutrition and nutrition in primary and secondary care and for the interface between public health, hospital and community directorates. [99283]

Yvette Cooper: Nutrition is dealt with by both the Department and the Joint Food Safety and Standards Group (JFSSG). The JFSSG is responsible for providing the scientific basis and information for nutrition policy

including defining a balanced diet and nutrient needs of the population and monitoring dietary intakes. The policies relating to prevention of malnutrition in the community—primary care, social care etc. and clinical care are within the remit of the Department.

Departmental officials are: Dr. Elizabeth Wilson who leads on clinical nutrition, that is the diagnosis and treatment of malnutrition, and Amy Edwards, who deals with the public health aspects of good nutrition and prevention of malnutrition in the community. The JFSSG official is Dr. Roger Skinner.

Pertussis Whole Cell Vaccine

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his Department changed its advice given in paragraph 24.4.5 of the 1996 advice booklet, "Immunisation Against Infectious Diseases", that local reactions and pyrexias occur less often after acellular pertussis vaccine than after whole cell vaccine. [99446]

Yvette Cooper: The advice that local reactions and pyrexia occur less often after acellular pertussis vaccine than after whole cell vaccine was first included in the 1996 edition of the Department of Health memorandum "Immunisation Against Infectious Diseases". This information had recently become available from a departmental funded study that directly compared different acellular vaccines with the United Kingdom whole cell vaccine. The study was subsequently published and copies of the paper have been placed in the Library (Miller E. et al. Effect of schedule on reactogenicity and antibody persistence of acellular and whole cell pertussis vaccines: value of laboratory tests as predictors of clinical performance. Vaccine 1997; 15(1): 51–60.).

Post Offices

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the principal activities of his Department and its agencies which provide business for *(a)* Crown post offices and *(b)* other post offices; if he will assess whether the level of business generated in each case is likely to increase or decrease over the next five years; and which new areas of business for post offices are likely to be developed by his Department and its agencies over the same period. [99557]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has a number of activities providing business for Crown and local post offices.

Crown post offices issue leaflets called "Health Advice for Travellers" to customers on request, check customers self-completion of form CM1 contained in the leaflet and issue properly completed and authorised Form E111 to entitled persons. These documents entitle the holder to free or reduced cost emergency health care in other European Economic Area states.

Main post offices also display a poster and two leaflets informing the general public about entitlement to help with health costs. They distribute approximately one million leaflets per annum.

Crown and other post offices pay cash refunds of prescription charges when presented with a properly completed claim form by a patient or his/her representative.

Crown and other post offices distribute milk tokens under the Welfare Food Scheme on behalf of the Department. Milk token issues through post offices are expected to decrease over the next five years.

Targets for electronic delivery of services (50 per cent. by 2005, 100 per cent. by 2008) represent a real opportunity for additional business for the Post Office network across all public services delivered by central government. Moreover, equivalent targets are now being set for local government, and there is an opportunity for the Post Office network to gain further business in delivery of services which are the responsibility of local government.

External Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been spent by his Department on external consultants and advisers since May 1997 funded from (i) his Department's programme provision and (ii) his Department's running costs. [99485]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* Total expenditure on external consultants and advisers, by the Department of Health and its Agencies[1], since May 1997 to 31 September 1999, is as follows:

[1]Excludes the Medicines Control Agency whose consultancy is funded through its trading fund and not from either running costs or programme spend.

	£ million
Department of Health	[1]20.69
Agencies	[2]3.08

[1] Only running costs
[2] Of this total, £126,570 only is from programme spend

Colo-rectal Cancer

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what clinical trials have been carried out on the use of Irinotecan in colo-rectal cancer treatment; if the chemical use of this drug will be approved by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence; and if he will make a statement. [99642]

Yvette Cooper: Irinotecan is a promising new agent for the treatment of advanced colorectal cancer which is being considered for possible referral to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). Two large randomised trials recently reported in the Lancet have indicated that irinotecan can give a small but significant benefit when used as a second line treatment. The Medical Research Council, which receives its funding from the Department of Trade and Industry, has recently given the go ahead for a major randomised trial in advanced colorectal cancer which aims to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of irinotecan and oxaliplatin, another new agent. The trial will consider not only response and survival but also quality of life and cost-effectiveness. The first patients should be randomised into the trial before the end of the year.

Further information on projects and trials relating to irinocetan can be found on the National Research Register. This is available in the Library and most medical libraries on CD Rom and on the Internet: http://www.doh.gov.uk/nrr.htm.

NICE published its first year work programme on 4 November and includes the development of wider guidelines on particular areas of treatment and appraisals of particular treatments and technologies.

Body Piercing

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what recent representations he has received on the need for further regulation of body piercing; [99889]

(2) what plans he has for further regulation of body piercing. [99890]

Yvette Cooper: The Government believe there should be primary legislation introduced to give local authorities outside London powers to regulate the hygiene and cleanliness of cosmetic body piercing businesses, when parliamentary time allows.

We have received a small number of letters from hon. Members, local authorities and members of the public about the further regulation of cosmetic body piercing businesses.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to encourage a greater awareness of the early signs of prostate cancer in men. [99871]

Yvette Cooper: We are concerned to promote awareness of prostate cancer and its symptoms. The Department and the Health Education Authority currently produce a range of literature on cancer in men, including prostate cancer, to raise men's awareness of the risks.

Hospital Infection Procedures

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of control of infection procedures in hospitals in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement on the standards set for such procedures in hospitals in other EU member states. [99892]

Yvette Cooper: We are determined to make sure that the National Health Service tackles the problem of hospital acquired infection. A review of infection control arrangements in all acute NHS Trusts has recently been undertaken by Regional Epidemiologists which will be used to improve services locally as appropriate. The emphasis the Government places on infection control in the NHS is reflected in the National Priorities Guidance 1999–2000 to 2001–02. This sets out the need to ensure that appropriate arrangements for the control of infection are in place. Health Service Circular 1999–049 (Resistance to Antibiotics and other Antimicrobial Agents, issued in March 1999) also addresses the need to strengthen prevention and control of communicable disease and infection control processes. On 22 November the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), launched new risk management and organisational control standards for the NHS including standards for hospital infection control. Compliance with these is the responsibility of chief executives and NHS trust board members.

The problem of infection control is a major concern at European level. A Commission resolution was agreed in June this year which cited infection control as an important part of the battle against antibiotic resistance. Within Europe hospital infection control arrangements vary from member state to member state and details are not held centrally.

Breast Cancer

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps he has taken and what discussions he has held, with a view to increasing the percentage of urgent breast cancer referrals that are included within the two week consultation pledge; [100004]

(2) what steps his Department has taken to make general practitioners aware of the need for urgent referrals of patients with suspected breast cancer to be received by the hospital within 24 hours in order to be covered by the guarantee that they will be seen by a specialist within two weeks. [100003]

Yvette Cooper: Guidance on the need to refer urgent referrals within 24 hours was issued to primary care leads, health authorities, National Health Service trusts and local medical centres through regional leads in December 1998. This has been augmented by additional guidance and the issue of revised breast cancer referral guidelines sent to all general practitioners in September 1999. This has been supported by action at local and regional levels to establish clear referral criteria and referral pathways so that those patients being referred urgently under the two week standard can be identified quickly and referred appropriately. We will continue to monitor the proportion of urgent referrals received within and outside 24 hours and to work with the professions to enable the maximum number of women to benefit from this high standard of care.

Cervical Smears

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent steps his Department has taken to analyse the potential impact of new technologies in improving the accuracy of diagnosis of cervical smears. [100255]

Yvette Cooper: We are aware of a number of new technologies under development, which are closely monitored by the National Health Service cervical screening programme. For example, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence have been asked to consider the evidence and advise on whether liquid-based cytology would offer worthwhile benefits.

We welcome any new technology that would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the cervical screening programme. However, before any technology is introduced we must be sure that it is safe and effective, and that quality standards can be maintained.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for making the Neopath Autopap for cervical screening available in *(a)* the NHS and *(b)* Grimsby NHS Trust. [100338]

Yvette Cooper: The Tripath Autopap system (previously Neopath Autopap system) is currently being evaluated by the National Health Service cervical screening programme.

We welcome any new technology that would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the cervical screening programme. However, before any technology is introduced we must be sure that it is safe and effective, and that quality standards can be maintained.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what date he expects the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones to produce its report. [100269]

Yvette Cooper: The group is expected to report in spring 2000.

Smoking-related Illness

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the estimated cost to the NHS in treating people suffering from illness as a result of smoking in each of the last five years. [100765]

Yvette Cooper: This information is not available on a year by year basis, but a study "Cost Effectiveness of Smoking Cessation Interventions" by the Health Education Authority, in collaboration with the University of York published in 1997 estimated the annual cost to the National Health Service of treating smoking related disease caused by smoking was between £1.4 billion and £1.7 billion for England.

St. John's Wort

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if all products containing St. John's Wort are deemed medicinal by the Medicines Control Agency. [100777]

Yvette Cooper: Products containing the widely used herbal remedy, St. John's Wort are classified as medicinal products by the Medicines Control Agency if they satisfy the definition of a medicinal product in Article 1.2 of Directive 65/65/EEC. The MCA does not deem all products containing St. John's Wort to be medicinal products. However, it does deem any product containing St. John's Wort at therapeutic dosage levels to be a medicinal product, because it may be administered with a view to modifying physiological function in human beings. A herbal remedy containing St. John's Wort may be exempt from licensing if it satisfies section 12 of the Medicines Act 1968.

COMA Inquiry

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the results of the COMA inquiry into fortifying bread with folic acid will be announced. [100822]

Yvette Cooper: The report entitled "Folic acid and the Prevention of Disease" prepared by the Working Group of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy, is expected to be published soon. The report focuses primarily on the role of folic acid in the prevention of neural tube defects.

Cancer Centres

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the designated cancer centre for surgery in each region of England. [102461]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The National Cancer Director, Professor Mike Richards, is developing a national approach to the evaluation of cancer services with regions, to ensure that we have a consistent approach nationally to the delivery of cancer care.

There are currently no rigid criteria for the designation or accreditation of cancer centres. Early implementation of the Calman/Hine recommendations reflected the different starting points across the country and allowed an evaluation of services to fit local circumstances.

London Ambulance Service

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many AS1 emergency calls were received by the London Ambulance Service on 26 October; how many AS2 urgent requests for ambulances were received on that date; and what is the *(a)* average and *(b)* longest time taken to respond to calls in each category. [102777]

Ms Stuart: The London Ambulance Service received 2,576 AS1 emergency calls and 373 AS2 urgent requests for ambulances on 26 October 1999.

The average time taken to respond to AS1 calls on that date was 9.9 minutes and the longest time was more than 30 minutes.

Information is not collected in this way for AS2 requests. However, the average time of arrival at hospital was four minutes later than the time specified by a general practitioner and the longest time was approximately 21 minutes after the time specified by a GP.

Terminally Ill Patients (Support Services)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support is provided by his Department for partners and near relatives of terminally ill patients. [102536]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Support for families and carers of terminally ill patients is an integral part of the principles and practice of palliative care. The Department of Health has distributed three documents providing guidance on key issues facing the dying and their carers. These documents were already widely used by the voluntary sector. The three documents which were issued under cover of HSC 1998/115 are:

i) Guidelines for Managing Cancer Pain in Adults.

ii) Changing Gear—Guidelines for Managing the Last Days of life in adults

iii) Palliative care in the hospital setting.

Professor Mike Richards, the new National Cancer Director, has identified supportive care as one of his key priorities and will over the coming months work closely with health care professionals and voluntary organisations to assess how supportive care services can best be provided to all patients.

In addition, the National Lottery New Opportunities Fund is making available £23 million for the prevention and palliative care element of the "Living with Cancer Programme" in England over the next three years. This initiative will be launched in January 2000.

Drug Tariff

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many products have been transferred from Category A of the Drug Tariff to Category D; and what was the cost per head of population in each category for the last financial year for each health authority area as recorded by the Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority. [102388]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* Products move in and out of Category D. There are 175 preparations/pack sizes classified as Category D in the December 1999 edition of the Drug Tariff, of which 104 were classified as Category A in the December 1998 edition of the Drug Tariff.

The net ingredient cost per head of population in 1998–99 of Category A and Category D drugs in each health authority is shown in the table.

The net ingredient cost per head of population for Category A and Category D drugs by health authority, 1998–99

£

Health authority in which item was dispensed	*Category A*	*Category D*
Avon	9.00	0.80
Barking and Havering	9.00	0.70
Barnet	8.30	0.60
Barnsley	11.00	0.90
Bedfordshire	9.00	0.60
Berkshire	7.50	0.60
Bexley and Greenwich	8.20	0.70
Birmingham	9.70	0.90
Bradford	10.60	0.90
Brent and Harrow	9.00	0.70
Bromley	8.90	0.70
Buckinghamshire	8.20	0.70
Bury and Rochdale	11.00	0.90
Calderdale and Kirklees	10.50	0.90
Cambridge and Huntingdon	7.00	0.60
Camden and Islington	9.00	0.70
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	10.20	0.80
County Durham	13.00	1.10
Coventry	9.90	0.70
Croydon	6.80	0.60
Doncaster	10.80	0.80
Dorset	10.10	0.80
Dudley	8.80	0.70
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	8.30	0.70
East and North Hertfordshire	10.00	0.70
East Kent	9.10	0.80
East Lancashire	10.60	0.90
East London and The City	9.10	0.80
East Norfolk	9.40	0.80
East Riding	9.10	0.70
East Surrey	7.90	0.60
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	10.30	0.90
Enfield and Haringey	7.90	0.60
Gateshead and South Tyneside	14.50	1.20
Gloucestershire	8.00	0.60
Herefordshire	8.00	0.70
Hillingdon	8.80	0.70
Isle of Wight	10.40	0.80
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	7.20	0.60
Kingston and Richmond	7.40	0.60
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	8.50	0.70
Leeds	10.10	0.90
Leicestershire	8.40	0.80
Lincolnshire	9.20	0.70
Liverpool	12.60	0.90
Manchester	11.10	1.00
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	7.20	0.60
Morecambe Bay	11.60	1.00
Newcastle and North Tyneside	13.30	1.00
North and East Devon	10.10	0.80
North and Mid Hampshire	7.30	0.60
North Cheshire	10.60	1.00
North Cumbria	11.70	0.90
North Derbyshire	10.00	0.90
North Essex	8.50	0.70
North Nottinghamshire	10.60	0.80
North Staffordshire	10.40	0.80
North West Anglia	8.60	0.70
North West Lancashire	12.10	0.90
North Yorkshire	9.80	0.80
Northamptonshire	9.20	0.90
Northumberland	12.50	1.00
Nottingham	8.90	0.70
Oxfordshire	8.30	0.70
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	10.10	0.80
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	8.20	0.70
Rotherham	10.40	0.90
Salford and Trafford	11.00	0.90
Sandwell	10.40	0.90
Sefton	11.70	0.90
Sheffield	11.60	1.10
Shropshire	8.70	0.70
Solihull	9.30	0.80
Somerset	8.60	0.80
South and West Devon	10.90	0.90
South Cheshire	9.80	0.80
South Essex	7.80	0.70
South Humber	9.90	0.90
South Lancashire	8.90	0.80
South Staffordshire	8.70	0.80
Southampton and South West Hampshire	9.30	0.70
Southern Derbyshire	10.40	0.80
St. Helens and Knowsley	12.90	1.10
Stockport	9.70	0.90
Suffolk	9.10	0.70
Sunderland	13.90	1.00
Tees	12.40	1.00
Wakefield	11.80	1.10
Walsall	10.30	0.80
Warwickshire	8.70	0.60
West Hertfordshire	10.20	0.70
West Kent	7.80	0.70
West Pennine	10.10	0.90
West Surrey	7.70	0.60
West Sussex	9.50	0.80
Wigan and Bolton	10.30	0.90
Wiltshire	8.20	0.70
Wirral	11.00	0.90
Wolverhampton	10.30	0.90
Worcestershire	9.10	0.70
England	9.50	0.80

Notes:

1. The data cover all prescriptions dispensed in the community in each Health authority, ie by community pharmacists and appliance contractors, dispensing doctors, and prescriptions submitted by prescribing doctors for items personally administered in England.
2. The net ingredient cost is the basic cost of a drug and does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charges income.
3. The resident population for 1998, estimated by the Office for National Statistics, has been used.
4. The information was obtained for each preparation/pack size classified in the Drug Tariff as Category A or D for each month in the period April 1998 to March 1999 and aggregated to provide an annual total.
5. Data rounded to nearest 10p.

Infertility

Ms Church: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment his Department has made of the psychological effects of infertility; [102678]

(2) how many written representations have been received by his Department in respect of infertility treatment and service provision since May 1997; [102675]

(3) when he will announce the results of his Department's survey of health authority provision of infertility services; and if he will make a statement; [102676]

(4) if he will provide guidance to health authorities as to their responsibilities in respect of the funding of infertility guidance. [102677]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The Department has received 319 written representations in respect of infertility treatment since May 1999.

It is planned that a short report detailing the results of the Department's survey of health authority provision of infertility services will be available in February 2000. The results of that survey are currently being considered by Ministers.

The Department has not commissioned any research specifically on the psychological effects of infertility. However, we do fully appreciate the distress suffered by infertile couples. This is clearly evident from the written representations received by the Department.

Uraemia

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* cases of and *(b)* deaths caused by uraemia there were among NHS patients in (i) 1995, (ii) 1996, (iii) 1997, (iv) 1998 and (v) the first six months of 1999. [103049]

Mr. Denham: The table shows the number of finished consultant episodes for patients with a primary diagnosis of Uraemia. The remainder of the hospital information requested is not yet available.

Year	*Number*
1995–96	40,294
1996–97	44,618
1997–98[1]	49,194
1999–2000[1,2]	18,590

[1] Data for 1997–98 onwards are provisional—no adjustments have as yet been made for shortfalls in the data, i. e. it is ungrossed.
[2] First six months.
Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics

Statistics are collected by the Office for National Statistics for deaths in England and Wales caused by renal failure (uraemia). They are not broken down to distinguish National Health Service from non-NHS patients, however. The following figures therefore include all such deaths:

Year	*Number*
1995	2,959
1996	2,759
1997	2,658
1998	2,662
1999	[1]1,337

[1] Provisional figures for January to June

CJD Victims

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to improve care for victims of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease; and if he will make a statement. [102889]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the statements made by the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), in the adjournment debate on the care of variant CJD (vCJD) patients which took place in Westminster Hall on 1 December 1999, *Official Report,* columns 109–116WH, in which he set out the measures in place or planned to improve the care provided for vCJD patients.

Environmental Radiation

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what calculation of radiation dose from plutonium to tracheo-bronchial lymph nodes was used to inform the Fourth report of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment. [102846]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) asked the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) to calculate radiation doses to the tracheo-bronchial lymph nodes of young people resident in the village of Seascale in Cumbria, who were aged 0 to 25 years. The doses calculated were for the period of time at which discharges of radioactive material from the Sellafield site were either at their highest (1975) or when the inhalation dose was at its highest (1955). However, even in the most pessimistic case in 1955, the total equivalent dose to the thoracic lymph nodes from natural background radiation is greater than that estimated from plutonium.

Radioactive Discharges

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department's funded project, entitled Geographical variations in childhood cancer incidence generally and in relation to nuclear installations, has ascertained the level of childen's exposure to radioactive isotopes discharged from nuclear-licensed sites in England and Wales. [102845]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* This project is examining the variations in the incidence of childhood cancer in Great Britain for the period 1969 to 1993 and is based on 33,000 cases. The analyses will include geographical proximity to nuclear licensed sites. The independent advisory Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment will consider the results of this study when it is completed, together with current evidence of population radiation exposure.

Ionising Radiation

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what areas of research the Radiological Protection Research Programme has identified as being necessary to the development of policy in the field of low-level ionising radiation. [102847]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 16 December 1999]:* The Department's Radiological Protection Research Programme is currently funding research aimed at improving the assessment of the health risk from exposure to both ionising and non-ionising radiation. The programme covers a broad range of molecular, cellular, biological and epidemiological studies. When the individual studies are complete they will be submitted for publication.

Overseas Doctors (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doctors from overseas are working in National Health Service hospitals in the Greater London area. [103729]

Mr. Denham: At 30 September 1998, there were 2,760 doctors in the London Regional Office area who qualified outside the European economic area.

Note:

Figures are rounded to the nearest 10

Source:

Department of Health medical and dental workforce census.

Health Visitors

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many children under five years of age are living in the area covered by Parkside Community Health Trust; [103360]

(2) how many children in *(a)* Brent, *(b)* Harrow, *(c)* Kensington and Chelsea and *(d)* Westminster have no named health visitor; [103359]

(3) how many full-time equivalent health visitors carrying a clinical case load are employed by Parkside Community Health Trust. [103361]

Mr. Denham: All children under five who are known to the health service in Brent, Harrow, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster have a named health visitor. There is a system of general practitioner attached health visitors plus a named health visitor for refugees, homeless and travellers.

There are 29,493 children aged less than five years resident in the area covered by Parkside Health NHS Trust. Data from Brent and Harrow Health Authority indicate a total under five population of 18,561 and data from Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority indicate an under five population of 10,962.

A total of 88.48 whole time equivalent (WTE) health visitors are employed by Parkside Health NHS Trust of which 42.41 WTE are in Brent and 46.07 WTE are in Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster. Currently there are 8.9 WTE vacancies, 2.9 WTE in Brent and 6 WTE in Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster. Agency health visitor staff are covering these vacancies.

Correspondence

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his Department will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Ashford of 25 September and 4 November; and if he will make a statement on the performance of the correspondence sections of his Department. [103858]

Yvette Cooper: I replied to the hon. Member's letter on 5 January.

The Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit works very hard to ensure that letters from hon. Members are turned around as quickly as possible. As recorded on 11 June 1999, *Official Report,* columns 403–06W, the Department's performance against its Service First target of 20 working days in replying to correspondence from hon. Members is 61 per cent. We are aware of the need for improvements in this area and work is currently underway to address this.

Alder Hey Hospital

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the terms of reference for the independent inquiry into the removal of children's organs at Alder Hey hospital; and to what timescale it will operate. [103753]

Mr. Denham: The independent inquiry team's terms of reference are to inquire into the circumstances leading to the removal, retention and disposal of human tissue, including organs of the body, from children at the Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital National Health Service Trust (and its predecessor NHS organisations) who have undergone post mortem examinations; to inquire into the extent to which the Human Tissue Act 1961 has been complied with; to examine professional practice and management action and systems, including what information and in what form that information was given to the children's parents or, where relevant, other family members in respect of the removal, retention and disposal of tissue; to examine the role of the NHS and other bodies or persons involved; to consider other issues relating to the above matters as necessary; to report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State by the end of March and make such recommendations as are appropriate.

Patents

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what use he has made of Crown immunity to avoid liability for breach of commercial patents on medical products. [R] [103301]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The Crown has no general immunity from proceedings in respect of infringement of a patent. However the Patents Act 1977, sections 55 to 59, allow the use of patented inventions for the services of the Crown without the consent of the patent owner. If these provisions are relied on, compensation for loss of profit has to be paid.

Law reports show the equivalent provisions in the Patents Act 1949 were used in 1961 by the then Minister of Health in respect of the anti-biotic tetracycline, but officials in my Department are not aware that these provisions have been relied on in recent years as regards medical products.

Illegal Drug Addiction

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he has in place to address illegal drug addiction. [103243]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Challenging targets for tackling drug misuse have been set by the United Kingdom Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator in

his "First Annual Report and National Plan" published in April this year. These will help to achieve the objectives of the Government's 10-year drugs strategy "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain". £70.5 million additional resources are being made available to health and local authorities over the next three years for drug treatment services. A further £18 million over three years will support drug prevention activity, particularly amongst young people.

Ante-natal/Neo-natal Screening

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the use of *(a)* ante and *(b)* neo-natal screening. [103652]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Ante and neo-natal screening procedures can be vital in the detection of impending illness and onset of disease, where these allow for early and effective intervention. There are many screening procedures, some of which have the potential to build upon the current screening programme.

We look to the National Screening Committee for the United Kingdom to appraise screening programmes, current and proposed, against a set of internationally recognised criteria and to advise on additions or changes.

Pregnancy Advice Centres

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to regulate pregnancy advice centres which do not refer clients on to medical procedures. [103668]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* It is not possible or practical to regulate the activities of every place, outside the National Health Service, that provides advice and information to women on pregnancy matters.

We do maintain a register of pregnancy advice bureaux that provide a medical consultation and refer women on for abortion. This list of registered places is publicly available and will shortly be on the Department's website.

Life Fertility Programme

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to fund the Life National Hotline and the Life Fertility Programme. [103669]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Decisions on applications received for funding under Section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968 from 2000–01 onwards have not yet been made.

Routine Admissions (Suspension)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those NHS trusts which have suspended routine admissions for at least *(a)* one week and *(b)* two weeks over the Christmas and New Year period. [104281]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not held centrally. The decision to suspend routine admissions would have been made at local level based on guidance on planning for winter and the millennium holiday period issued earlier last year.

Health Authority Funding

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will express in per capita terms the *(a)* actual and *(b)* percentage funding increases for each health authority in England in 2000–01. [104171]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

Health authority	*Cash increase per capita (£)*	*Cash increase Percentage*
Avon	40.44	6.90
Barking and Havering	42.77	6.39
Barnet	41.78	6.58
Barnsley	50.91	7.62
Bedfordshire	42.19	7.62
Berkshire	39.16	7.35
Bexley and Greenwich	43.00	6.22
Birmingham	43.22	6.48
Bradford	46.53	7.19
Brent and Harrow	43.32	6.38
Bromley	40.69	6.60
Buckinghamshire	38.02	7.24
Bury and Rochdale	47.85	7.26
Calderdale and Kirklees	42.51	6.64
Cambridgeshire	38.85	7.14
Camden and Islington	59.45	6.79
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	42.38	6.55
County Durham	48.04	7.04
Coventry	45.47	7.21
Croydon	41.64	6.85
Doncaster	46.97	6.98
Dorset	40.02	6.25
Dudley	41.33	6.93
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	47.06	6.70
East and North Hertfordshire	38.68	6.91
East Kent	41.71	6.22
East Lancashire	48.67	7.10
East London and the City	62.63	8.02
East Riding	43.20	6.96
East Surrey	37.49	6.21
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	42.59	6.25
Enfield and Haringey	44.80	6.53
Gateshead and South Tyneside	51.04	7.18
Gloucestershire	37.57	6.31
Herefordshire	39.43	6.67
Hillingdon	42.24	6.73
Isle of Wight	45.58	6.21
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	62.49	8.50
Kingston and Richmond	39.05	6.22
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	54.63	6.85
Leeds	43.79	6.81
Leicestershire	41.33	7.41
Lincolnshire	41.59	6.83
Liverpool	49.26	6.57
Manchester	50.40	6.60
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	42.70	6.31
Morecambe Bay	42.16	6.37
Newcastle and North Tyneside	48.89	6.89
Norfolk	40.24	6.65
North and East Devon	39.90	6.32
North and Mid Hampshire	34.75	6.57
North Cheshire	41.34	6.38
North Cumbria	43.23	6.92
North Derbyshire	41.98	6.77
North Essex	38.98	6.68
North Nottinghamshire	43.87	7.12
North Staffordshire	47.23	7.24
North West Lancashire	47.36	6.79
North Yorkshire	39.38	6.71
Northamptonshire	37.52	6.44
Northumberland	44.66	7.01
Nottingham	45.47	7.46
Oxfordshire	37.16	7.09
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	39.95	6.69
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	42.24	6.22
Rotherham	47.96	7.28

Health authority	Cash increase per capita (£)	Cash increase Percentage
Salford and Trafford	45.79	6.56
Sandwell	48.37	7.14
Sefton	46.18	6.53
Sheffield	45.37	6.64
Shropshire	40.11	6.89
Solihull	38.36	6.53
Somerset	39.83	6.66
South and West Devon	41.37	6.42
South Cheshire	38.60	6.40
South Derbyshire	41.45	6.95
South Essex	41.68	7.05
South Humber	39.96	6.24
South Lancashire	39.89	6.48
South Staffordshire	37.53	6.63
Southampton and South West Hampshire	39.48	6.68
St Helen's and Knowsley	49.33	7.14
Stockport	40.24	6.52
Suffolk	37.08	6.42
Sunderland	50.55	7.20
Tees	49.32	7.34
Wakefield	45.50	6.95
Walsall	47.42	7.28
Warwickshire	36.83	6.22
West Hertfordshire	38.84	6.52
West Kent	37.17	6.41
West Pennine	46.53	7.00
West Surrey	36.55	6.26
West Sussex	42.09	6.76
Wigan and Bolton	47.83	7.28
Wiltshire	36.15	6.31
Wirral	46.36	6.54
Wolverhampton	48.60	7.35
Worcestershire	36.92	6.47

Notes:
1. Crude population figures supplied by the Office for National Statistics have been used to calculate the per capita figures.
2. Amounts include increases to targeted funding for Health Action Zones.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Carers

17. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to improve the level of benefits paid to carers. [102947]

20. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to help carers. [102950]

Mr. Bayley: We are committed under the National Carer's Strategy to keeping financial support for carers under review, which we are doing.

Social Exclusion

21. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what further resources are proposed to reduce social exclusion. [102951]

Mr. Bayley: Over this Parliament we are investing an extra £40 billion in health and education, and we will be spending an additional £6 billion a year by the end of this Parliament in new measures to tackle child poverty.

It is this Government that have made tackling poverty and social exclusion its priority. We are currently examining resources in the spending review and will make an announcement next year.

25. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out the Government's plans to tackle poverty and social exclusion arising out of welfare dependency. [102955]

Mr. Bayley: A key element in our strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion is to reduce the number of people claiming out-of-work benefits by helping people find work.

The proportion of people living in working age workless households doubled between 1979 and 1997—this is the legacy we inherited and the challenge we face. It is a problem we are committed to overcome through our programme of welfare reform.

One-Stop Benefits

22. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how the one-stop benefit trials are progressing. [102952]

29. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on progress so far with the ONE pilots. [102959]

Angela Eagle: The ONE service began operating in four pilot areas on 28 June 1999, and in eight more areas on 29 November. The early signs from the pilots appear encouraging but it will, of course, take time to make a full assessment of the impact. When robust and reliable data are available we will, of course, make it public.

Minimum Income Guarantee

23. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to ensure maximum take-up of the minimum income guarantee by those entitled to it. [102953]

Mr. Rooker: We are committed to taking action to find more effective ways of encouraging eligible pensioners to claim their entitlement to the minimum income guarantee. We will announce details of a national programme shortly.

NIRS2

24. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the number of pensioners still affected by the NIRS2 computer problems. [102954]

Mr. Rooker: It is estimated that currently there are up to 83,000 pensioners who are still affected by current and past NIRS2 computer problems. The Benefits Agency anticipates that this backlog will be cleared during the course of 2000.

New Deal (Lone Parents)

26. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made with the New Deal for Lone Parents; and if he will make a statement. [102956]

Angela Eagle: The New Deal for Lone Parents is providing active support to help lone parents move into work. In the first year of the national programme over 104,000 lone parents have attended interviews; 89 per cent. of these have agreed to participate in the

programme; and over 28,000 lone parents have obtained jobs. In his pre-Budget report the Chancellor announced a package of improvements to the programme to build on the success of NDLP so far.

Computer Systems (Benefits)

27. **Mr. Brazier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to unify his Department's computer system for benefit payments with that of the Inland Revenue. [102957]

Mr. Rooker: There are no plans to unify the Department's computer systems with those of the Inland Revenue. However, this Department, the Inland Revenue, the Department for Education and Employment and local authorities are working together to ensure that joined-up client-focused welfare services can be offered to all.

Millennium Compliance

28. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if his Department experienced computer problems at the start of the new millennium. [102958]

Angela Eagle: There was only one minor incident across the whole range of the Department's 33 main computer systems, after the Millennium Date Change. This problem, which affected the transfer of certain specific Social Fund cases between offices, has since been fixed. Two of the Department's 783 administrative support systems had problems, which have also been fixed. This outcome follows the Department's substantial work to prepare for this event.

Pension Provision

30. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps have been taken by the Government to promote personal provision of pensions. [102960]

Mr. Rooker: We published a Green Paper in December 1998, setting out our proposals for pension reform. Our proposals will help everyone build up a decent second pension. The reformed system will ensure that all those who can save for a second pension will be able to do so.

For people who have access to them, occupational pensions remain the best option; we have already implemented some of the measures we proposed to strengthen and support occupational pension schemes in the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999. Further measures are in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill currently before Parliament.

The new stakeholder pensions will be a secure, flexible, and value for money way to help up to 5 million people who do not have access to an occupational pension and for whom personal pensions can be unsuitable to save for their retirement. Stakeholder Pensions will be designed to help those on middle incomes—around £9,000-£20,000 a year—but will benefit those on higher incomes as well. The legislation to put in place the basic framework for stakeholder pension schemes is included in the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999. We are continuing to consult on key areas of detail which will be set out in secondary legislation and we expect to publish draft Regulations shortly.

We are reforming the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme through the introduction of the State Second Pension. This will give a dramatic boost to the pensions of low earners, carers and some long-term disabled people. Legislation is included in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill.

We are also improving the quality of general and personal information on pensions. We are working in partnership with employers and the pensions industry to provide annual combined pension forecasts of current and projected state and private pension rights. A combined statement will give individuals a clearer indication of what sort of retirement income they might expect and enable them to make informed decisions about the level of savings they need to make.

In June 1998, we also published a series of pensions information leaflets. These provide concise and accessible information in plain English about the pensions choices available to individuals. The leaflets relate to decisions individuals need to take at various life stages. The leaflets met the Plain English Campaign Crystal Mark standard and have been awarded the Money Management Council Quality Mark for providing clear and unbiased information on money matters. The leaflets have been promoted through marketing activity. The Financial Services Authority also provide more detailed information on certain financial issues, which complements the Departmental leaflets.

Disability Living Allowance (Mobility Component)

31. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have lost the mobility component of their disability benefit in each of the past two years. [102961]

Mr. Bayley: 114,400 awards of the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance stopped in 1997–98, and 129,900 in 1998–99. These figures are equivalent to around 7 per cent. of recipients. Awards stop in various circumstances, for example when recipients die, go to live abroad permanently, or experience a significant improvement in their ability to get around.

Pensioners Benefits

32. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to help pensioners with small second incomes who do not qualify for benefits. [102962]

Mr. Rooker: During our process of modernising and reforming welfare, we will consider all the components that make up the benefit system with a view to ensuring that the least well-off pensioners share in the rising national prosperity.

Fraud

33. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement indicating which of his anti-fraud targets he is likely *(a)* to meet and *(b)* not to meet by the end of the current financial year. [102963]

Mr. Rooker: As published in the Public Service Agreement, for the first time we have set a single outcome target to reduce fraud and error in the two major benefits,

Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance, by 30 per cent. by March 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002.

State Pension Uprating

34. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the April 2000 uprating of the state pension. [102964]

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made a statement on new rates of benefit, including State Retirement Pension, to apply from next April in a Written Answer on 9 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 564–78W.

Child Poverty

35. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the level of child poverty in Britain. [102965]

Mr. Bayley: Far too many children's lives are blighted by poverty and social exclusion. That is why the Prime Minister has made it our aim to eradicate child poverty in the next 20 years.

Disablement Benefits

36. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to improve the quality of medical assessments as part of integrating testing for disablement benefits. [102966]

Mr. Bayley: The qualifying criteria for the various benefits for sick and disabled people vary and may need to be assessed separately on different occasions. The development of an integrated medical assessment would be complex and there are no immediate plans to introduce such an assessment.

The issue of the quality of medical assessments in general is, however, taken very seriously. Standards relating to experience, qualifications and training are set out in the Benefits Agency's contract with the SEMA Group, which provides medical services. The work of all doctors is also subject to regular audit against nationally determined standards which are agreed by the Department's Chief Medical Adviser.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the total spending on housing benefit *(a)* in 1996–97 adjusted for inflation and *(b)* projected for 1999–2000. [102942]

Angela Eagle: Housing benefit expenditure is expected to fall from £12 billion in 1996–97 to £11.2 billion in 1999–2000 in real terms.

Departmental Employees (Disabled People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is registered as disabled; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of disabled people in his Department. [102044]

Mr. Bayley: Existing data indicate that 4.1 per cent. of employees in the Department have stated that they have a disability.

This Department has put a range of measures in place to encourage the employment of people with disabilities, using the Cabinet Office "Programme for Action to Achieve Equality of Opportunity in the Civil Service for Disabled People". This sets out action checklists for all departments, covering the recruitment, retention and career development of people with disabilities. In addition, this Department participates in the "Positive about Disabled People Symbol" scheme (known as the "two ticks" symbol).

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of the total work force in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102728]

Mr. Bayley: Existing data indicate that 5.83 per cent. of employees in the Department are of minority ethnic origin.

My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office set out in his reply of 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 264W, corporate action that we are taking to encourage the employment of people from minority ethnic groups. This Department aspires to improve the diversity of its work force at every level and has put in place a range of measures specifically to encourage the employment of people with minority ethnic backgrounds and address current under-representation, particularly at senior levels.

In addition to our plans to improve in the area of recruitment, we have a number of initiatives for developing the talent already in the Department. We are committed to achieving our goals by setting realistic but stretching targets by 31 March 2000 which will be underpinned by action plans encompassing imaginative outreach and positive action initiatives. Some specific examples are:

working closely with the Employment Services to gain better understanding of the barriers restricting people from minority ethnic groups from applying for jobs;

liaising with ethnic groups and ethnic community leaders to identify the scope of potential recruitment candidates and work towards breaking down perceived barriers. Producing equal opportunities policy statements in different languages has assisted in this respect;

targeting schools and universities with a high percentage of minority ethnic students;

taking part in careers fairs to attract minority ethnic undergraduates who may be suitable for fast stream development;

participating in the Windsor Fellowship Scheme, which is run by an educational trust to introduce minority ethnic undergraduates as student placements to prepare them for management careers;

working with organisations to offer its managers as mentors to minority ethnic students (in 1999, a BA manager was voted Mentor of the Year by the NMC).

Winter Fuel Allowance

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans the Government have to extend the £100 winter heating allowance to disabled people below the age of retirement. [103864]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the Written Answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 325W.

Council Tax Rebate Allowances

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received about changes to the calculation of non-dependant income contributions to council tax rebate allowances; and if he will make a statement. [103723]

Angela Eagle: While we have not received any representations on this issue, we have recently announced changes to the non-dependant deductions scheme. These changes were included in the annual benefit uprating package which was announced to the House on 9 November. From April 2000, non-dependant deductions for Council Tax Benefit will increase by 7 per cent., which is in line with average council tax increases. The income thresholds at which the level of deductions are set will, as is customary, rise by the ROSSI index (1.6 per cent.).

Information Technology Services Agency

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what conditions he has identified as reasonable cause to terminate outsourcing contracts for the Information Technology Services Agency in terms of *(a)* cost, *(b)* delay and *(c)* failure to meet operational needs. [103623]

Angela Eagle: The Department is in detailed discussions and negotiations with its preferred IT supplier, Affinity. This work will not be complete before February and it is not until then that the detail of the contracts, in respect of termination, will have been finalised.

We intend to make sure that sufficient contractual safeguards are in place in the event that the service provider fails to meet the contractual service requirements. Termination is one of the safeguards under discussion.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he next plans to meet trade union side representatives to discuss plans for outsourcing at the Information Technology Services Agency. [103624]

Angela Eagle: The Department has met with representatives from the Trade Union Side (TUS) at both Agency and Departmental level since the initial announcement regarding the future IS/IT Strategy for the Department. I also met with representatives of Departmental and Agency TUS on 25 November to discuss their concerns regarding the decision to outsource.

Regular meetings between the Agency and the local TUS are taking place and a schedule of meetings, up to the end of March, has been agreed. A consultation framework has also been agreed between ITSA and TUS.

The working relationship with the TUS in ITSA and consultation process is well established. We are being kept informed of all significant outcomes of meetings with TUS. We have no current plans to have further meetings with the TUS on this matter.

Appeal Tribunals

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what remuneration, pensions and allowances are paid by his Department to persons who are appointed under the Social Security Act 1998 to act as members of an appeal tribunal; and if he will make a statement. [103731]

Angela Eagle: My right hon. and noble Friend The Lord Chancellor has set up a panel of persons to act as members of appeal tribunals and has made all appointments to it. The panel has 67 full-time members (excluding the President of appeal tribunals), all of whom are legally qualified. There are 1,971 part-time members with legal, medical and financial qualifications and with experience of dealing with the needs of disabled persons.

Full-time panel members are salary paid. The average annual salaries at November 1999 were £99,022 for panel members heading the six regions within the Appeals Service and £83,146 for the remaining full-time members. Travelling and, where applicable, subsistence allowances are also payable to full-time panel members where they are required to attend a tribunal hearing away from their normal venue.

As judicial appointments, full-time panel members belong to the Judicial Pensions Scheme but some have elected to have their pension benefits paid by analogy with the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme.

Part-time panel members are paid on a daily or sessional (half day) basis. The current rate of fees is set out in the following table:

£

	Fee per session	*per day*	*Preparation fee*[1]
Legally qualified	138.50	277.00	[2]30.00 [3]60.00
Medically qualified (non-specialist)	103.00	206.00	—
Medically qualified (specialist)	126.00	252.00	[2]27.00 [3]54.00
Financially qualified	118.50	237.00	—
Experience of disability	63.50	127.00	—

[1] Preparation fees are payable to legally qualified panel members and medical specialists who hear appeals relating to Industrial Injuries Scheme benefits, Severe Disablement Allowance and Vaccine Damage

[2] Per session

[3] Per day

Pensions are not payable to part-time panel members, but they may claim travel expenses for journeys between their home and tribunal venues. Where applicable, subsistence allowance is also payable.

Other fees and allowances payable include training fees, lengthy attendance fees and fees for sessions which are cancelled.

Benefits (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people in Scotland, under the age of 18 years, are in receipt of *(a)* Income Support, *(b)* Housing Benefit, *(c)* Jobseeker's Allowance and *(d)* Lone Parent Benefit as part of Child Benefit. [103866]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Number of people under 18 in Scotland who receive Income Support, Housing Benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance and Lone Parent Benefit as part of Child Benefit

Benefit type	*Claimants aged 16 and 17*
Income Support (August 1999)	2,100
Housing Benefit (May 1998)	[1]700
Jobseeker's Allowance (August 1999)	600
Lone parent addition as part of Child Benefit (August 1999)	700

[1] The Housing Benefit figure is based on a 1 per cent. sample and therefore subject to a high degree of sampling error. For example, the estimate of 700 could lie within the range of approximately 200 to 1,200.

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.
2. Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance and Child Benefit figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and as such subject to a degree of sampling error.
3. Precise figures cannot be provided because the figures have been extrapolated from small samples and will therefore be subject to a high degree of sampling error.

Sources:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1999—5 per cent.
Jobseeker's Allowance Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1999—5 per cent.
Housing Benefit Management Information System, annual 1 per cent. inquiries taken on the second Thursday of May 1998.
Child Benefit Computer System—5 per cent. sample.

Invalid Care Allowance (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many people in Scotland have become ineligible for invalid care allowance on the grounds of age in each of the last five years; [103865]

(2) how many people in Scotland have received invalid care allowance in each year since 1991. [103759]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what advice is given to assessors and adjudicators on applications for Disability Living Allowance on the mobility and care needs of those suffering from achondroplasia; [103642]

(2) what account is taken of the needs of persons suffering from achondroplasia in framing criteria for Disability Living Allowance. [103641]

Mr. Bayley: Entitlement to Disability Living Allowance (DLA) depends on the extent to which a severely disabled person needs help with personal care, requires supervision or has difficulty getting around. People with achondroplasia have access to DLA in the same way as other severely disabled people.

Guidance on the likely effects of a large range of disabling conditions is contained in the Disability Handbook issued to all decision makers. The Disability Living Allowance Advisory Board provides decision makers with regular updates and information on other conditions, to be used in conjunction with the Handbook. Advice, in this form, on the likely effects of achondroplasia and associated complications, was issued in August 1995.

In addition to the training and written guidance that decision makers receive, they also have access to advice from doctors, if they need further information relating to any medical condition or combination of conditions.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security after what period data about payments made by absent parents is routinely erased from CSA records. [103116]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Mr. Richard Livsey, dated 23 December 1999:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

The account history information on the CSA computer system is subject to an archiving process. This process examines account transactions that have reached a completed status ie. for a given charge there is a receipt and an associated payment out. Once these completed transactions are 365 days old they are marked as eligible for archiving and removed from the online system to the archive database.

Data that is held in the archive database is available for retrieval as a hard copy report. There is currently no processing which deletes this data from the system archive database.

The CSA business requirement in respect of deletion of financial data states that the information must be retained for the current financial year and the succeeding six. As CSA initial action only commenced in June 1993 the Agency does not have any financial data that has surpassed this age.

The Agency intends to examine the need to delete archived data next year however, any data removed will be subject to the appropriate business rules as noted above.

I hope this is helpful.

Basic State Pension

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the value of the basic state pension for *(a)* single pensioners and *(b)* pensioner couples, for each year between November 1979 and April 2000; and what it would have been if it had been uprated in line with the higher in each year of average earnings or prices. [103956]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

£ per week

Uprating date	Single pensioner actual rates	Single pensioner increased by higher of earnings or prices	Pensioner couple actual rates	Pensioner couple increased by higher of earnings or prices
November 1979	23.30	23.30	37.30	37.30
November 1980	27.15	27.60	43.45	44.20
November 1981	29.60	30.90	47.35	49.50
November 1982	32.85	33.50	52.55	53.65
November 1983	34.05	36.40	54.50	58.30
November 1984	35.80	38.25	57.30	61.25
November 1985	38.30	41.60	61.30	66.60
July 1986	38.70	43.45	61.95	69.60
April 1987	39.50	45.90	63.25	73.50
April 1988	41.15	49.50	65.90	79.25
April 1989	43.60	53.85	69.80	86.20
April 1990	46.90	59.05	75.10	94.55
April 1991	52.00	65.50	83.25	104.85
April 1992	54.15	70.50	86.70	112.85
April 1993	56.10	73.90	89.80	118.30
April 1994	57.60	76.25	92.10	121.95
April 1995	58.85	78.85	94.10	126.10
April 1996	61.15	81.95	97.75	131.05
April 1997	62.45	85.40	99.80	136.55
April 1998	64.70	88.90	103.40	142.15
April 1999	66.75	93.25	106.70	149.10
April 2000	67.50	97.45	107.90	155.80

Notes:

1. The Retail Price Index (all items) has been used as published by the Office for National Statistics.
2. Average Earnings Index Whole Economy (Non Seasonally Adjusted) as published by the Office for National Statistics.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5p at each uprating.
4. From April 1994 the basic rate of retirement pension has been increased by 50p on a single person and 20p on a pensioner couple to reflect VAT on fuel.
5. The figures for November 1979 to November 1982 have been calculated using actual increases in Retail Prices Index rather than forecast increases.

Opportunity for All

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each of the 32 indicators in Opportunity for All which of the other indicators and targets are Opportunity for All targets. [103484]

Mr. Rooker: We placed further information on the indicators of success in the Library of the House on 21 September to coincide with the publication of "Opportunity for All". There are no specific "Opportunity for All" targets. The paper placed in the Library shows where there is a corresponding Government target for each of the 32 indicators.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what baseline information has been developed for those indicators without baseline data in Opportunity for All. [103714]

Mr. Rooker: We are currently developing the baselines for those indicators without baseline information and will report on their development in the second annual report on the Government's Strategy for Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reason men aged 60 to 65 years are entitled to receive the winter fuel bonus if they are claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or Income Support. [103486]

Angela Eagle: Those men aged 60 or over in receipt of Income Support or income-based Jobseeker's Allowance which includes a pensioner premium have been eligible for winter fuel payments since the scheme began. They are among the poorest elderly people and as such we decided that they should be eligible for this help.

We have announced that winter fuel payments will be extended to everyone aged 60 and over from next winter. The payments will be backdated to the start of the scheme.

Child Benefits

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total allocation for his Department in 1996–97 and projected for 1999–2000 on child benefits. [102943]

Angela Eagle: Expenditure on Child Benefits for the financial year 1996–97 amounted to £6,941 million. It is estimated that expenditure for 1999–2000 will reach £8,286 million.

Note:

1. Figure for 1996–97 includes One Parent Benefit (£317 million).
2. Figure for 1999–2000 is planned expenditure and it includes Lone Parent Addition of £128 million.

Source:

Departmental Report

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what records his Department holds for current recipients of Invalid Care Allowance on the duration of their claim. [104142]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Recipients of Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) as at 21 July 1999

	Number of carers	*Percentage of total recipients*
Less than 1 year	64,486	17.2
1 to 2 years	61,302	16.4
2 to 5 years	127,403	34.1
5 to 10 years	88,234	23.6
Over 10 years	32,594	8.7
Total	374,019	100

Source:
ICA Unit, 100 per cent. count

Child Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list each of the categories of family that will be worse off as a result of the child support measures contained in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill; if he will list in each case the number of *(a)* families and *(b)* children so affected; and if he will estimate the average loss for each group. [104141]

Angela Eagle: The impact of the child support reforms will depend on a number of different factors, including the level of child support liability, whether this liability is being paid and whether the parent with care is on benefit. Over one million children will benefit from the reforms. However, in order to forecast which individual families are likely to be better or worse off as a result of the changes, we would need to establish the extent to which the non-resident parent is compliant now and estimate future compliance. We have not made such estimates; these could be provided only at disproportionate cost and we are not confident that the results would be reliable.

It is inevitable that there will be differences in liability between the current and the new schemes. Under the new scheme we will get more parents paying more of what is due for their children. Payments of maintenance are already fully ignored in Working Families Tax Credit. Parents with care on Income Support will see the benefit of maintenance for the first time. They will gain up to £10 a week through the introduction of the new child maintenance premium. The payment of regular, reliable maintenance will also form a foundation on which parents with care can consider options for work.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the likely completion date of the computer system being prepared for the Child Support Agency; and if it is his policy not to implement the new maintenance formula contained in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill until that computer system is in place. [104139]

Angela Eagle: We have always made clear that we intend to introduce the new child support system as soon as possible, but that will not be before the end of 2001 at the earliest. We are determined not to repeat the failures of the current system by introducing reforms too quickly or before new IT systems are ready.

State Second Pension

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate, for each of the 10 financial years starting from 2003–04, *(a)* expenditure on SERPS if the state second pension were not to be introduced, *(b)* expenditure on SERPS if the state second pension were to be introduced, *(c)* expenditure on the state second pension, assuming implementation in 2003–04 and a move to a flat rate scheme in 2008–09 and *(d)* the additional cost of national insurance rebates to those earning less than £9,000 per annum on each of the two alternative regimes proposed in his recent consultation document. [104140]

Mr. Rooker: The information is contained in the following tables. It is based on the assumptions that the State Second Pension will be introduced in April 2002 and that it will move to a flat-rate scheme in 2006–07 (five years after Stakeholder Pension Schemes are introduced). Costings based on introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2003 and a move to a flat-rate scheme in 2008–09 are not available at this time.

All figures are expressed in 1999–2000 price terms and are rounded to the nearest £0.1 billion. The Low Earnings Threshold in State Second Pension is set at £9,500 pa for that year.

Expenditure on SERPS if the State Second Pension were not introduced

	£ billion
2002–03	5.8
2003–04	6.2
2004–05	6.6
2005–06	7.0
2006–07	7.4
2007–08	7.8
2008–09	8.2
2009–10	8.6
2010–11	8.9
2011–12	9.2

Expenditure on SERPS if the State Second Pension were to be introduced in April 2002

	£ billion
2002–03	5.7
2003–04	6.2
2004–05	6.6
2005–06	7.0
2006–07	7.3
2007–08	7.7
2008–09	8.0
2009–10	8.3
2010–11	8.6
2011–12	8.8

Expenditure on the State Second Pension, if introduced in April 2002 and followed by a move to a flat-rate scheme in 2006–07

	£ billion
2002–03	0
2003–04	0
2004–05	0
2005–06	0.1
2006–07	0.2
2007–08	0.3
2008–09	0.5
2009–10	0.6
2010–11	0.8
2011–12	1.0

The additional cost of national insurance rebates to those earning less than £9,500 pa based on the first approach contained in the recent consultation document The Structure of Rebates for the State Second Pension

	£ billion
2002–03	0.1
2003–04	0.2
2004–05	0.2
2005–06	0.2
2006–07	0.3
2007–08	0.3
2008–09	0.3
2009–10	0.3
2010–11	0.3
2011–12	0.3

Note:
These extra rebates are for those contracted-out of the State Second Pension via Contracted-Out Salary Related schemes, Contracted-Out Money Purchase schemes and Appropriate Personal Pension schemes. The figures do not include additional rebates paid to people earning between £9,500 and £21,600

The additional cost of national insurance rebates to those earning less than £9,500 pa based on the second approach contained in the consultation document

	£ billion
2002–03	0
2003–04	0.1
2004–05	0.1
2005–06	0.1
2006–07	0.1
2007–08	0.1
2008–09	0.2
2009–10	0.2
2010–11	0.2
2011–12	0.2

Note:
These extra rebates are for those contracted-out of the State Second Pension via Appropriate Personal Pension schemes. The figures do not include additional rebates paid to people earning between £9,500 and £21,600 between £9,500 and £21,600

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress has been made in developing proposals for stakeholder pensions. [104429]

Mr. Darling: Stakeholder pensions are intended to fill the gap for the many people who can afford to save for their retirement but do not currently have a suitable means of doing so. Following passage of the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999, which sets the framework for stakeholder schemes, and extensive consultation on the detailed arrangements, we have now made decisions in a number of key areas. I am placing in the Library the Government's response to the consultation. The paper, "Stakeholder Pensions—Outcome of the Consultation" is also available in the Vote Office. The main points are:

Schemes will only be able to charge in one way, on the value of the member's fund, and will not be allowed to charge more than 1 per cent. a year. No extra charges can be made if the member stops paying in, or wishes to transfer to another scheme.

Schemes will accept any contributions of £20 or more.

Schemes must provide information and explanatory material to potential members, but will not be required to offer individual financial advice within the 1 per cent. charge. Schemes may provide individual advice within the charge limit if they wish, or charge a separate fee.

Schemes will be able to set up with a board of trustees, or can be run by an authorised stakeholder scheme manager.

Employers will generally be required to give access to a stakeholder scheme from October 2001, unless they already offer a suitable alternative. Employers with fewer than five staff will initially be exempt from this requirement, but the arrangement will be reviewed in three years' time. Employers who arrange group personal pensions and who make a contribution of at least 3 per cent. of earnings will also initially be exempt, subject to review after three years.

Existing rebates for Contracted-out Money Purchase Schemes and Appropriate Personal Pension schemes will apply to stakeholder pension schemes.

Specific requirements will be incorporated in secondary legislation, on which we shall consult in draft shortly.

BA Security and Investigation Service

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many staff BASIS have employed in each area for each of the last 12 months; [103482]

(2) what is the full complement of staff at each BASIS office and on 1 December how many of these posts were vacant; [103483]

(3) how many BASIS staff at each area office have been with BASIS for 12 months or more. [103485]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the tables.

Number of staff BASIS have employed in each area for each of the last 12 months

	Business Development Team	Southern	Northern	National Intelligence
1998				
December	33	144	83	28
1999				
January	33	143	83	27
February	31	146	83	31
March	33	143	82	31
April	34	138	79	39
May	34	139	79	44
June	37	138	77	44
July	34	139	76	43
August	33	154	74	50
September	34	143	73	52
October	32	148	71	53
November	35	147	74	57

Numbers for the full complement of staff at each BASIS office and the number of vacancies

Office/Team	Full complement	Staff in post	Vacancies
Business Development Team (BDT):			
BDT	34	35	0
Southern area:			
Nottingham	19	17	2
Birmingham	19	17	2
Cardiff	19	15	4
London:			
Team 1	21	21	0
Team 2	21	16	5
Team 3	21	14	7
Team 4	21	14	7
Team 5	21	15	6
Team 6	21	16	5

Numbers for the full complement of staff at each BASIS office and the number of vacancies

Office/Team	*Full complement*	*Staff in post*	*Vacancies*
Northern area:			
Scotland	19	16	3
Newcastle	19	12	7
Leeds	19	18	1
Manchester	19	18	1
Liverpool	19	10	9
National Intelligence Unit:			
Identity Fraud Management Unit	26	21	5
Financial Investigation Unit	5	3	2
Giro Validation	16	6	10
National Intelligence Unit	29	27	2
Totals	388	311	[1]78

[1] A further recruitment exercise was carried out throughout October and November 1999. The interviews will be taking place in the next few weeks with a view to filling the vacancies.

Numbers of BASIS staff at each area office who have been with BASIS for 12 months or more

Team	*Number*
Business Development Team	15
Southern	99
Northern	53
National Intelligence	15

DEFENCE

Written Questions

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many questions for written answer he replied to by means of a letter placed in the Library rather than by a substantive answer in the *Official Report* in *(a)* Session 1998–99, *(b)* Session 1997–98 and *(c)* Session 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [99840]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Out of a total of 2,351 Commons written questions tabled to Defence Ministers during Session 1998–99, our database records that 198 were answered by means of a letter placed in the Library rather than by a substantive reply in the *Official Report*. The database did not capture such information prior to the 1998–99 Session, and consequently it could only be provided at disproportionate cost for previous sessions.

Defence Housing Executive

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost of developing the new national computer network within the Defence Housing Executive. [100288]

Mr. Kilfoyle: It is assumed that this question refers to Project DOMIS, the PFI procurement which is intended to replace the Defence Housing Executive's (DHE's) existing computer system to provide an enhanced housing service to members of the armed services and their families.

The system will link DHE's 202 offices throughout mainland UK and provide a modern, efficient housing allocation service together with improved management information.

The Project has not yet reached the stage of placing a contract. The costs to date of the in-house team and consultants who are developing the requirements amount to £2.1 million.

RN Vessels (UN Operations)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Royal Navy vessels have been involved in United Nations operations in the last two years; and how long was each operation. [101663]

Mr. Hoon: No Royal Navy vessels have operated directly under UN command in the last two years, but they have supported a number of UN mandated operations or enforced UN security resolutions.

HMS Glasgow joined Australian-led forces operating in support of the UN mandated International Force in East Timor (INTERFET) from 18–30 September 1999.

HMS Cumberland, Nottingham, Newcastle, Coventry, Birmingham and Exeter have participated in the Multinational force enforcing sanctions against Iraq under UN Security Council Resolution 665.

Humanitarian patrols of the Iraqi no-fly zones, in support of UN Security Council Resolution 688, have also been carried out by aircraft operating from HMS Invincible in February and March 1999. Aircraft operating from HMS Invincible who was replaced by HMS Illustrious also carried out patrols of the Iraqi no-fly zones over the period January to March 1998.

Air Sea Rescue Service

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the UK Air Sea Rescue Service. [101333]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 6 December 1999]:* I can only comment upon the military Search and Rescue (SAR) contribution, as the overall responsibility for civil SAR rests with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Although the primary responsibility of the military SAR force is to rescue downed military aircrew, in peacetime the force also makes a significant contribution to rescuing civilians.

The Strategic Defence Review (SDR) confirmed that the operational side of the RAF SAR should be maintained as a military task, with the priority of rescuing service personnel in the United Kingdom and surrounding seas. The military SAR force continues to provide an unequalled service with a capability which is second to none.

The feasibility of contractorising the maintenance of SAR aircraft will be examined as part of the Sea King replacement strategy.

HMS Chatham

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of the refit of HMS Chatham; and if he will make a statement. [101670]

Mr. Spellar: Expenditure to date on HMS Chatham's refit is some £22 million, which includes an element for additional work which could not have been foreseen

before the refit began. Final payment will be made on completion of the guarantee period, which expires in December 2000.

HMS Brave

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of HMS Brave being held in extended readiness. [101671]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Brave entered extended readiness in April 1999. Since then, £0.38 million has been spent in keeping her in this state. This figure includes the cost of preparations for extended readiness and the cost of the tow from Devonport to Portsmouth. The estimated cost to hold her in extended readiness for the next year will be a further £0.4 million.

Forces Legal Aid

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if *(a)* staff (i) in the NAAFI, (ii) in DERA and (iii) of civilian contractors and *(b)* their dependants are eligible for forces legal aid; [102585]

(2) for each of the three armed services, who is eligible for forces legal aid; and what are the criteria which must be met; [102587]

(3) what is the sum available this year for legal aid in respect of each armed service; and what sums will be available in the next three years to take account of proposed legislation in the Armed Forces Discipline Bill *[Lords]*; [102586]

(4) under what circumstances civilians are eligible for forces legal aid. [102588]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Legal aid is available, from Service sources, for those who are to be tried by court-martial, who wish to appeal to the Courts-Martial Appeal Court, who are to be tried by a standing civilian court (the equivalent of a magistrates court which sits outside the UK), or who are to be tried by a criminal court outside the UK for an off-duty offence.

The criteria that must be met by anyone applying for Service legal aid are that they must be subject to Service law (that is, are bound by one of the three single Service Discipline Acts), and assistance must be in the interests of justice. Individuals will be required to show that they have insufficient means to obtain assistance without help from public funds (and, in the case of an incident abroad, that the host country has no equivalent scheme for non-nationals). Depending on their personal means and commitments, individuals will be required to provide a personal contribution. The MOD scheme broadly mirrors the criteria applied by the civilian legal aid authorities in England and Wales.

Those covered under the Service scheme are Service personnel in the UK and overseas, and attached civilians (including defence Agency personnel) and dependants abroad. However, there has been a long-standing policy that UK personnel employed abroad by a number of specified organisations, including the NAAFI, can make use of the Service legal aid scheme, subject to the funds being subsequently repaid. (It is a matter for the organisations concerned whether they or the individuals involved undertake the required reimbursement.) Civilian contractors, whether engaged either in work in the UK or abroad, are not eligible for Service legal aid as they are not subject to Service law.

The sums available this year for Service legal aid are £100,000 for the Royal Navy, £770,000 for the Army and £146,000 for the Royal Air Force.

The increase in Service legal aid as a result of the legislation proposed in the Armed Forces Discipline Bill will depend on the number and nature of cases handled.

Army Foundation College

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence where the new Army Foundation College is to be based. [102579]

Mr. Spellar: At the present time no conclusions have been reached as to the site for the new Army Foundation College.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the site for the new Army Foundation College is designated *(a)* green field or *(b)* brown field. [102578]

Mr. Spellar: It has not yet been determined where the new Army Foundation College is to be and therefore the designation of its site is not yet known.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the conclusions of the value for money exercise conducted in determining the location of the new Army Foundation College. [102580]

Mr. Spellar: The information contained in the Investment Appraisals that have so far been undertaken in examination of the options for a second Army Foundation College will form the basis of advice to Ministers and are being withheld at present under Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Consultants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department's agencies and non-departmental public bodies have spent on external consultants and advisers since May 1997. [102073]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Principle Anti-air Missile Systems

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many medium-range Principle anti-air missile systems the United Kingdom has developed in the last three years. [103033]

Mr. Kilfoyle: One.

Troop Movements

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many UK troops will be transferred from East Timor to *(a)* Brunei and *(b)* the UK at the end of December. [103060]

Mr. Hoon: All UK troops, with the exception of two UN Monitoring Observers, returned from East Timor before the end of December. A total of 284 troops were transferred from East Timor, with 46 returning to the UK

and 238 returning to Brunei. The withdrawal started on 8 December, following confirmation from the INTERFET Commander, Major-General Cosgrove, that their tasks were complete. The final contingent of Gurkhas arrived back in Brunei on 10 December and UK-based troops arrived home on 17 December.

Asymmetric Warfare

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received on the United Kingdom's asymmetric warfare; and if he will make a statement. [103032]

Mr. Spellar: My Department continually monitors and assesses threats to UK interests, whether they are conventional in nature or "asymmetric". The analysis influences our defence policy and planning to ensure that British defence capability is well placed to respond to the threats and opportunities we face now and may face in the future. The subject of asymmetric warfare is so broad as to appear frequently in representations and debates on defence and security policy.

DERA (PPP Proposals)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a list of the organisations and individuals who responded to the consultation document on the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency public private partnership proposals published by his Department in May. [103183]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I have today placed in the Library of the House a list showing all the non-Governmental organisations that have provided written responses to the DERA PPP consultation document. Some responses, for example from trade associations, represented a consolidated view from a number of organisations consulted as part of their own consultation process. Similarly, a number of organisations and individuals responded orally through participation in consultation events. For reasons of confidentiality, the list does not include the names of individuals who responded on a personal basis, either to the Ministry of Defence or through their Member of Parliament.

Gulf Veterans

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what meetings officials from the Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Unit were held with officials of the United States Department of Veteran Affairs between January and December 1998; *(a)* on what dates and *(b)* where each meeting took place; and for which section of the United States Department of Veteran Affairs the officials who attended each meeting worked. [103149]

Mr. Spellar: During 1998, officials from my Department's Gulf Veterans Illnesses Unit visited Washington DC on the following occasions: 16–18 February; 14–20 June; 26 September-3 October and 23–26 November. They would have met officials representing the US Department of Veterans Affairs on these occasions. In the time available, it has not proved possible to trace records of the meetings to establish in which sections of the Department of Veterans Affairs these officials worked. I will write to the hon. Gentleman if this information can be found.

In addition to the above, a member of the Gulf Veterans Illness Unit (GVIU) based in Washington DC maintains continuous dialogue with United States Department of Veterans Affairs colleagues.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many times Ministers in his Department met members and officials on the United States Government between 2 May 1997 and 1 January 1998; on what dates and at which locations; and which *(a)* Ministers and *(b)* US counterparts and officials attended each meeting. [103181]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Between 2 May 1997 and 1 January 1998, MOD Ministers met US Government members and officials on the following occasions:

Date	*Minister*
For the Armed Forces	
4 July 1997	The right hon. John Dalton, Secretary US Navy—in UK
15 October 1997	Dr. John Hamre, Under Secretary—in US
16 October 1997	The hon. Togo West, Secretary of the Army—in US
Defence Procurement	
1 July 1997	Joe Reeder, US Secretary of State of the Navy—in UK
6 October 1997	The hon. John Dalton, Secretary of the Navy—in US
6 October 1997	Dr. John Hamre, Deputy Secretary of Defense—in US
8 October 1997	The hon. William Cohen, Secretary of Defense—in US

Full records of the officials present at these meetings are not kept.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103847]

Mr. Spellar: Delivering efficient and modern public services is a key part of the Government's agenda for improving productivity. Greater efficiency is being sought within the public sector to ensure that the most effective results are obtained from available resources. The Ministry of Defence's (MOD) Public Service Agreement (PSA) sets out the objectives, key targets and resources for the MOD and the Armed Forces, and includes a range of measures to ensure that the budget allocated to defence purchases the maximum capability for the Armed Forces and fulfils the plans set out in the Strategic Defence Review.

The key measures from the PSA that will help raise the Department's productivity are shown below:

The MOD is committed to achieving efficiency savings of 3 per cent. a year (as a percentage of the operating costs efficiency baseline) for the period 1998–99 to 2001–02. In support of this, savings of at least £15 million a year are generated from ideas implemented through MOD's GEMS scheme, one of the most successful staff suggestion programmes in the UK.

The appointment of a Chief of Defence Logistics, followed by the creation of a unified organisation to provide logistic support to all three Services, will help to achieve a reduction in book value of non munitions stockholdings of £2.2 billion by April 2001.

The MOD is reforming its procurement organisation through the creation of the Defence Procurement Agency and implementation of the Smart Procurement Initiative. The DPA has been set a target to reduce its operating costs by 20 per cent. by 2001–02.

The Department is committed to slimming down its central headquarters organisation, which has already reduced by 30 per cent. since 1990; and to reducing the planned number of office buildings to be occupied to two (from 24 in 1990).

The Department is developing a strategy for better management and utilisation of the overall defence estate, including the realisation of gross receipts of more than £700 million from the sale of surplus property.

MOD will regularly and systematically review all services and activities not directly associated with front line forces over a five year period in line with Government policy, "Better Quality Services". The Department will pursue private sector involvement in MOD business, where it provides best value for money, through Public/Private Partnership initiatives.

The MOD is on track to meet the targets described above. The Defence White Paper 1999 (Cm 4446) and the Ministry of Defence Performance Report 1998–99 (Cm 4520), which were published on 20 December 1999, describe the progress that has been made in implementing the Strategic Defence Review and against the targets set in the MOD's PSA.

Departmental Employees (Early Retirement)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many employees of his Department took early retirement packages and at what total cost, in the financial year 1996–97. [103362]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Early departure packages are available for staff over 50 years of age (classed as retirement) and under 50 years of age (classed as severance). The total number of early leavers, including voluntary and compulsory redundancies, caused by reductions and geographical relocations (but excluding Trading Fund Agencies) were 1,712 in Financial Year 1996–97. The total is broken down by category in the table.

Retirement category	*Category sub-total*	*Total*
Approved early retirement	—	109
Actuarially reduced retirement	—	11
Compulsory early retirement/Severance:		
CER on Structural grounds	30	—
CER on Redundancy grounds	595	—
CES on Structural grounds	14	—
CES on Redundancy grounds	443	—
CER/CES total	—	1,082
Flexible early retirement/severance:		
FER on Structural grounds	73	—
FER on Limited Postability	6	—
FES on Structural grounds	1	—
FES on Limited Postability	5	—
FER/FES total	—	85
Voluntary redundancy		
Voluntary Redundancy (CER terms)	214	—
Voluntary Redundancy (CES terms)	211	—
Voluntary Redundancy total	—	425
Total		1,712

Financial Year 1996–97 represented the final round of the Department's "Options for Change" review and most of the early leavers left as a consequence of the review. The total cost to the Ministry of Defence in Financial Year 1996–97 was £61.181 million. This represents the cost of the initial and annual compensation, and any lump sum payments for retirements that took place in that year. The annual compensation payment for staff over 50 years of age at the point of leaving continues to be met by the MOD until individuals reach the minimum retirement age of 60 years.

Antonov 124–100

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what length of runway is required for the Antonov 124–100 when fully loaded. [103104]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Lindsay Hoyle, dated 10 January 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence in which you asked what length of runway is required for the Antonov AN 124–100 when fully loaded. This matter falls to me for answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

According to Antonov promotional literature, when fully loaded the An124–100 requires a runway length of 3,000 metres.

Territorial Army Land (Crosby)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what representations he has received from the Territorial Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Association in Hightown regarding the purchase of access land; [103748]

(2) if he will make a statement on the land owned and managed by the Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Association in Hightown (Crosby), Merseyside. [103747]

Mr. Spellar: The Territorial Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve's (TAVRA) rifle range at Altcar is accessed via a private road that passes through land that was sold in July 1998 to two parties. It has not been possible to reach an agreement to renew the right of way to the rifle range with one of the landowners. My Department is therefore considering options to resolve this difficulty. In the meantime, the rifle range is being accessed through a secondary entrance as a temporary measure.

Joint Rapid Reaction Force

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact of the Joint Rapid Reaction Force Exercise in Oman, scheduled for October 2001, on *(a)* the timetable for a decision on the FTA programme and *(b)* the assessment of the merits of the A400M aircraft. [103110]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* We have always known that A400M would not be available in the short term and the Joint Rapid Reaction Force

exercise in Oman in 2001 has not, therefore, been a factor in our assessment of the aircraft or of the FTA programme.

Gurkha Pensions

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he has completed his examination of Gurkha pensions. [103638]

Mr. Spellar: The examination of Gurkha pensions and gratuities is now complete. Within the terms of the Tri-Partite Agreement (TPA) between India, Nepal and the UK Gurkha pensions will be increased to allow for a welfare related cash uplift to take account of Indian Government benefits in kind that will at least double the pension payments for all Gurkha pensioners. Increases will be introduced from 1 April 2000. Pension increases will continue to be paid immediately after 15 years service and, where appropriate, passed on to the widow and then a child up to the age of 25 years. Pensions will be reviewed in the normal way and will benefit from cost of living increases each year. The Nepalese Government have made representations throughout this examination and both the Nepalese and Indian Governments have been notified of the increases.

Sandhurst

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many and what percentage of officers accepted for training at Sandhurst Military College in each of the last five years received their secondary education in *(a)* independent and public schools and *(b)* maintained schools, broken down by company. [103871]

Mr. Spellar: This information is not available in the form requested. An estimated breakdown of the secondary education of British Officer Cadets at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst for each of the past five financial years is as follows:

	Welbeck College		State schools		Independent schools		Overseas schools		
Financial year of entry	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Total*
1994–95	27	4.4	284	46.6	277	45.5	21	3.5	609
1995–96	23	3.6	332	51.7	273	42.5	14	2.2	642
1996–97	24	3.6	341	51.3	293	44.1	6	1.0	664
1997–98	26	4.4	299	50.2	259	43.4	12	2.0	596
1998–99	22	3.7	289	48.7	274	46.1	9	1.5	594

Welbeck College is the Army's 6th Form College. The majority of its students are from the State sector.

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many and what percentage of officers accepted for training at Sandhurst Military College have been discharged for medical reasons before completing their training, broken down by company, in each of the last five years. [103870]

Mr. Spellar: The information is not available in the detail requested. The numbers of British Officer Cadets who have been medically discharged from the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, in each of the last five calendar years, are as follows:

Calendar year	*Numbers medically discharged*	*Total in training*
1995	40 (6%)	686
1996	26 (4%)	642
1997	[1]22 (3%)	751
1998	[1]19 (3%)	663
1999	[1]6 (1%)	598

[1] There are a number of cadets who are still undergoing treatment/remedial training and who may yet be medically discharged

Gulf War (Friendly Fire)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what facilities his Department provided for the US Army Depleted Uranium Assessment Unit to investigate the medical results and contamination data relating to British troops injured or killed by friendly fire in the Gulf conflict. [103654]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* None. The US Department of Defense informs us that there is no "US Army Depleted Uranium Assessment Unit". The Ministry of Defence is not aware of any "friendly fire" incidents during which British troops were injured or killed by depleted uranium-based ammunition during the Gulf conflict.

Unexploded Grenade (Falkirk)

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the incident on 15 December when schoolboys discovered a grenade near the Forth and Clyde Canal at Falkirk; and if he will make a statement about public safety in respect of other ammunition in that area. [103916]

Mr. Spellar: A World War 2 vintage No. 36 Mills bomb, common issue during that period, was discovered in the area of the Forth and Clyde Canal near Falkirk High School by pupils from the school on Wednesday 15 December 1999 following excavation work at the site. An Explosive Ordnance Disposal team from the Army was immediately called to the scene and successfully destroyed the device. There has been no recorded training with weapons previously in the vicinity of the school and it has not been possible to identify the reason for the grenade being there.

With respect to other arms and ammunition in the area, I can confirm that, wherever arms and ammunition are stored on an Army establishment, this is done in accordance with the appropriate regulations. These are written to ensure that arms and ammunition are secure at all times. I can assure you that the arrangements at the nearby Territorial Army Unit at Grangemouth (153 Workshop Coy REME (V)) are in accordance with these regulations.

Type 45 Destroyer

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the 12 Ship Programme for the Type 45 Destroyer will *(a)* start and *(b)* be completed. [103924]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Type 45 Destroyer programme is already under way and on 23 November 1999 BAE Systems was appointed as Prime Contractor and awarded a contract to complete the Preparation For Demonstration phase. As regards the delivery programme for the Type 45 warships, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 342W.

Horizon Project

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total cost was of UK involvement in the Horizon Project; and what the cost of withdrawing from the project was. [103925]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 10 January 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the cost of UK involvement in the tri-national Horizon Frigate Programme. This matter falls to me to answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

As was made clear in evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee on 16 June 1999, the UK did not withdraw from Horizon. The three countries involved agreed not to proceed to the next phase. Phase 1 of the Horizon Programme (project Definition and Initial Design) was subsequently completed at the end of October 1999. It was also mentioned in evidence that about £100M that had been spent on Horizon (including spend on NFR90 and other studies). This figure covered UK expenditure on the Programme up to 31 March 1999 and I expect the final amount to be under £120M.

Until the contract for the Demonstration and First of Class Phase of the Programme is placed, I am unable to say precisely how much of the investment in Horizon will translate into the national Type 45 programme but I can confirm that our plans for the Type 45 Destroyer build on the work accomplished in the design definition phase of the Horizon Programme and the Prime Contractor has indicated that he will pull through some 70% of the Horizon output (Horizon costs were shared equally between the three nations).

Nancekuke Base, Cornwall

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what substances are currently stored at the Nancekuke military base in Cornwall. [103942]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Substances currently stored at the former Chemical Defence Establishment Nancekuke, now RAF Portreath, are limited to Petroleum Oils and Lubricants which support the RAF role, together with some agricultural chemicals owned and used by a tenant farmer.

Staff Recruitment

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make it his policy for agencies acting on behalf of his Department to recruit senior staff on the basis of open competition only; and if he will make a statement. [103902]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My Department currently has 42 agencies. The Chief Executives of 28 of these have already been or will, next time around, be appointed following an open competition. The remaining 14 Chief Executives are all military officers.

In addition, a number of Chief Executives have chosen to recruit senior staff at Senior Civil Service, grade 6 and grade 7 levels by open competition on fixed term appointments, within the authority laid out in their Agency Framework Documents.

In line with Sir Richard Wilson's recent report to the Prime Minister on Civil Service Reform, my Department has a target over the next five years to achieve a 10 per cent. year-on-year increase in open competitions for middle and senior managers across the Department, particularly aimed at bringing in new thinking and people who have skills that are currently in short supply.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what was the total cost of full-time permanent staff instructors in each of the last three years in the Territorial Army; [103930]

(2) what the total cost is of full-time personnel commanding Territorial Army units in the current financial year. [103928]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Kosovo

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Temporary Field Accommodation has been fully deployed in Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [103763]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* It is currently envisaged that the Temporary Field Accommodation (TFA) project in Kosovo will be completed in February 2000.

Faslane Shiplift

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions since 19 June the shiplift at Faslane has been used by *(a)* submarines and *(b)* surface ships; and if he will make a statement. [103411]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Since 19 June 1999, the Shiplift at HM Naval Base Clyde has been used for the operational dockings of one surface ship (Minor War Vessel) from 22 June to 2 July, and one submarine (SSBN) from 7 July to 8 August. The facility has been non-operational since 1 September while essential Y2K compliance work was undertaken on the lift control and protection system. The replacement system completed the commissioning phase on 17 December.

Broadsword

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Salisbury of 29 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 4W, on

the Territorial Army Joint Services Adventure Sail Training Vessel Broadsword, if he will list each repair and its cost since the refit in May 1998. [103406]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* The Joint Services Adventure Sail Training Vessel Broadsword returned from the Transglobe Inter-Service global yacht race on 10 December. The original estimate for likely repair work associated with this race was £14,000. Since its refit, including the period of the race, a total of £32,844 has been spent on repairs, as shown in the following table:

£

Country of repair/main areas of repair	*Cost of repair*
United Kingdom	
Deck, generator and communication equipment	2,572
Antigua	
Battery charger unit, electrical repairs, generator and main engine	2,224
Panama	
Main engine	1,240
Acapulco	
Minor Miscellaneous items	200
Honolulu	
Mast, communication equipment, generator, water system and structural	6,714
Hong Kong	
Sail	2,172
Singapore	
Batteries, sails, electrics, general repairs	4,908
Capetown	
Installation of gas system, sails, electrics, general repairs	6,691
Rio de Janeiro	
Main engine, fresh water tanks	4,916
Antigua	
Generator, main engine	507
Azores	
Water tank, batter charger and generator	[1]700

[1] Estimated

Training Fleet

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in respect of the Joint Services Adventure Sail Training Fleet *(a)* what have been the running costs in each of the past five years, *(b)* what is (i) the current market value and (ii) the replacement cost of each vessel in the fleet and *(c)* if he will consider replacing the fleet with a PPP arrangement with leased yachts and instructors. [103409]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* The running costs for the Joint Services Adventure Sail Training Fleet in each of the past five years are:

Year	*£ million*
1994–95	0.890
1995–96	0.920
1996–97	1.017
1997–98	0.996
1998–99	1.238

These costs include low level and routine maintenance and repair. Higher level upkeep (levels 3 and 4 maintenance) figures for the previous three years are:

Year	*£000*
1996–97	[1]383
1997–98	[2]756
1998–99	[2]654

[1] Upkeep only
[2] Upkeep and repair

The figures for 1997–98 and 1998–99 include the cost of upkeep (major refit) work to comply with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency Code of Practice for Sail Training Vessels. Costs for earlier years can be provided only at disproportionate effort since funding specific to JSASTC can be isolated only by examining all bills received for minor warship repair work in this period.

The training fleet currently operates 14 × Victoria 34 and 8 × Nicholson 55 sail training craft. The market value of each vessel will vary according to individual condition and the availability of similar vessels also on the market. The current market value for the Victoria 34s is estimated at £60,000 and £100,000 for the Nicholson 55s.

Replacement costs are estimated to be £150,000 for a Victoria 34 and £800,000 for a Nicholson 55. These are current market prices (new) and include VAT. No replacements are included in the current procurement programme.

We have no plans at present to replace the fleet with a PPP arrangement.

Correspondence

Sir Peter Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he proposes to reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for Fareham to his predecessor, dated 24 February, about ensuring secure future supplies of ammunition for British forces. [104316]

Mr. Hoon: I will write to the hon. Member shortly.

Royal Navy Vessels (Asbestos)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his Department's annual budget is for removal of asbestos from Royal Navy vessels. [104319]

Mr. Spellar: There is no specific annual budget for the removal of asbestos from Royal Navy vessels as it is planned to undertake the majority of this work during scheduled maintenance periods and refits. However, it is estimated that the total cost of the programme to eliminate asbestos, wherever practicable, will be about £7.5 million. This includes the cost of replacement stocks.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information senior officers on Trident submarines are given on the specific yields and likely targets of the missiles they are responsible for. [104077]

Mr. Hoon: The Trident missiles on which our nuclear deterrent is based have been de-targeted since 1994. In the circumstances of our having to use our nuclear weapons,

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members of the patrolling submarine crew would be provided with the information they need to discharge their duties. I am withholding the details of this information under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information relating to defence, security and international relations.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had, and with whom, on the application of international humanitarian law to the use of Trident. [104072]

Mr. Hoon: I have had no specific discussions on the application of international humanitarian law to the use of Trident. The United Kingdom's minimum nuclear deterrent is consistent with international law.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will make a statement on the application of the Nuremberg Principles to military personnel ordered to use, or to threaten the use of, nuclear weapons; [104075]

(2) what measures he has taken to make military personnel who operate Trident aware of their obligations under international law since the International Court of Justice delivered its Advisory Opinion on nuclear weapons; [104076]

(3) how a member of the armed services would obtain an account of the Government's submission to the International Court of Justice on the legality of its nuclear deterrence policy; and if he will place a copy of the submission in the Library. [104078]

Mr. Hoon: The United Kingdom's minimum nuclear deterrent is consistent with international law. It follows that UK military personnel engaged in the operation or support of Trident are acting legally under the Nuremberg Principals. This has been made clear down the chain of command, and members of the Armed Services who seek further guidance on these issues can in the first instance do so through their chain of command.

Guidance on the Law of Armed Conflict for the Armed Services is set out in the draft Joint Service Manual on the Law of Armed Conflict (Joint Service Publication 383) currently under preparation. We aim to publish this later this year, as we pledged at the 50th Anniversary Conference of the International Red Cross in November 1999. When it is published a copy will be placed in the Library of the House. The relevant section on Nuclear Weapons was reconfirmed following the 1996 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. It reads:

> "There is no specific rule of international law, express or implied, which prohibits the use of nuclear weapons. The legality of their use depends upon the application of the general rules of international law, including those regulating the inherent right of self defence and the conduct of hostilities. Those rules cannot be applied in isolation from any factual context to imply a prohibition of a general nature. Whether the use, or threatened use, of nuclear weapons in a particular case is lawful depends on all the circumstances. Nuclear weapons fall to be dealt with by reference to the same general principles as apply to conventional weapons. However, the new rules introduced in Additional Protocol I [to the Geneva Conventions] are not intended to have any effect on and do not regulate or prohibit the use of nuclear weapons."

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment his Department has carried out of the long-term effects of a 100 kiloton Trident on a military target; [104074]

(2) what assessment his Department has carried out of the effects of a 100 kiloton Trident warhead detonation on the civilian population living near military targets. [104073]

Mr. Hoon: The Trident missiles on which our nuclear deterrent is based have been de-targeted since 1994. Our judgment of the minimum level of deterrence required is supported by comprehensive computer modelling which enables us to assess the effects of nuclear detonations. A number of factors are taken into account in this assessment. As Lord Robertson made clear to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) on 4 February 1998, *Official Report*, column 655W, these include the yield and design of the weapon used; the accuracy of the delivery system employed; the nature and construction of the target; the characteristics of the surrounding terrain; the height of the detonation; and geological and weather conditions. I am withholding information on UK nuclear warhead yield under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, relating to defence, security and international relations.

Storm Shadow Cruise Missile

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the cost of developing the Royal Ordnance Augmented Charge for the UK's Storm Shadow Cruise Missile. [104111]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 10 January 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence which sought information on the cost of developing the Royal Ordnance Augmented Charge for the UK's Storm Shadow air launched stand-off missile. This matter falls for answer within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The Augmented Charge was initially developed under private venture funding by Royal Ordnance. However, the adaption of this warhead for Storm Shadow is being undertaken as part of the Storm Shadow contract between ourselves and Matra BAe (Dynamics) UK Ltd. The Matra bid was submitted on a competitive basis, and we therefore have no visibility of the detailed cost breakdown of the warhead element.

I am sorry I cannot be more helpful.

Aircraft Carrier Group Deployment

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the operational reasons for cancelling a deployment by an aircraft carrier group to the USA and Caribbean from February to April 1999. [104153]

Mr. Spellar: HMS Invincible had been scheduled to participate in the US-led Joint Task Force Exercise in the western Atlantic between mid-February to early March 1999 but the deployment was cancelled. HMS Invincible was instead sent to the Gulf region on an operational

deployment. The reason for deploying HMS Invincible to the Gulf at that time was announced to the House by the Secretary of State for Defence on 14 January 1999.

Although we were unable to send a carrier to the Joint Task Force Exercise, the Royal Navy still made a significant contribution to the exercise. Commander United Kingdom Task Group and his staff participated in the exercise and the ships HMS Montrose, HMS Marlborough, HMS Sutherland together with RFA Oakleaf also participated. HMS Norfolk also contributed to this exercise while assigned to NATO's Standing Naval Forces Atlantic.

STANOC Centre

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel are assigned to the STANOC centre; on what date it was established; and from which subheads of which votes its funds are taken. [104318]

Mr. Spellar: The Army's Surveillance, Target Acquisition, Night Observation and Counter-Surveillance Centre (STANOC) was formed in 1971. The current establishment is two officers and four other ranks. The Centre is funded by the Adjutant General's Top Level Budget under the following Votes and subheads:

Vote 1

Army Manpower—subhead 1B1

Travel and Subsistence—subhead 1E1

Stationery—subhead 1L9

IT—subhead 1F5.

Minister for the Armed Forces (Speech)

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library the speech given by the Minister for the Armed Forces on European Security and Defence to the French German UK Seminar at the Institut de Haute Education de la Defense Nationale (IHEDN), Paris, on 30 November. [104162]

Mr. Spellar: I am grateful for the hon. Member's interest in the recent seminar held at the Institute de Haute Education de la Defense Nationale (IHEDN) in Paris, which formed part of our "Outreach" programme of bilateral defence assistance to Central and Eastern Europe and was organised jointly with the French and German governments. I am pleased to tell him that I have arranged for a copy of my speech to the seminar to be placed in the Library of the House.

HMS Westminster

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the withdrawal of HMS Westminster from Flotex and the In Year Budget Management Measure. [104152]

Mr. Spellar: The withdrawal of HMS Westminster from Flotex 99 needs to be set in the context of a very busy operational year for the Royal Navy and a sharp increase in fuel prices. This has resulted in some adjustment of planned activities as part of normal cash management action to ensure that the Fleet stays within its allocated budget this year.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what data he has collated on the local environmental effects of the use of depleted uranium with respect to *(a)* human and *(b)* other life forms. [104263]

Mr. Spellar: The existing scientific literature on the possible hazards of depleted uranium (DU) is extensive. In 1993, the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's Radiation Protection Service, then the Defence Radiological Protection Service, published a summary report of its assessment of the radiological and chemical hazards of DU. The report explained that there are two types of hazard posted by the use of DU: a radiation hazard, although DU is a low specific activity material (as defined by the International Atomic Energy Agency); and a chemical toxicity hazard, which is similar to that posed by other heavy metals, such as lead.

A Ministry of Defence paper entitled "Testing for the presence of depleted uranium in UK veterans of the Gulf conflict: The Current Position" was published on 19 March 1999. This paper describes the scenarios in which UK troops may have been exposed to DU in the Gulf and outlines the possible health effects of exposures.

In December 1993, the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency commissioned the independent environmental consultants W. S. Atkins to conduct an environmental impact assessment of DU firings on Ministry of Defence ranges in the UK. The consultants' report was published in 1995 and concluded that the radiation doses to members of the public and the associated risks from exposure to DU released in the environment, were extremely low. These conclusions were, and continue to be, sustained by comprehensive monitoring programmes at both sites.

In addition, the joint UN Environment Programme/UN Commission on Human Settlements issued its report "The Kosovo Consequences for Environment" on 5 October 1999. The report assessed the potential effects on human health and the environment arising from the possible use of depleted uranium during the 1999 Kosovo conflict.

Copies of all of these documents have been placed in the Library of the House.

Finally, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) on 2 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 89W, concerning a further review by the Ministry of Defence on the health effects of DU.

Chinook Crash

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the recommendations made by the Air Accidents Investigation Branch following the accident involving RAF Chinook 2D576 in 1994; and if he will make a statement regarding the implementation of these recommendations. [104051]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

GM Foods

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the research work funded by his Department associated with the farm-scale trials of GM crops. [101750]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him on 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 184–85W, where this project is listed in the table under code RG0116.

CAP Payments (Worcestershire)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the total value to Worcestershire farmers of CAP payments for *(a)* the 1998 calendar year and *(b)* the 1998–99 financial year. [103028]

Ms Quin: The total value of all CAP payments (including the Agri-Environment Schemes) to farmers in Worcestershire are estimated to be of the order of £22.5 million in the 1998 calendar/financial year. The differential between the calendar year and financial year would be small since three quarters of the payments relate to Arable Aid payments which are made between October and the end of December.

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farms in Worcestershire received CAP payments in the *(a)* 1998 calendar year and *(b)* 1998–99 financial year. [103174]

Ms Quin: The number of farms receiving CAP payments in the 1998 calendar year in Worcestershire was approximately 1,390. Figures for the financial year are not recorded, but the figures would be expected to be similar.

Egg Producers

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what financial assistance from the Government are available to British egg producers to market their products *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* in the rest of the EU; and if he will make a statement. [103303]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend announced in September a package of aid which included £1 million to help primary producers in England improve their marketing, levels of collaboration and competitiveness. This commitment was implemented through the launch on 11 October of the Agriculture Development Scheme 1999, a non-capital support measure open to all sectors of the agri-food industry, including egg producers.

By the deadline for applications of 30 November, 160 applications, seeking £8.1 million in grant, had been received, including several from the egg sector. In light of this level of interest my right hon. Friend announced on 13 December that the budget for the scheme would be doubled to £2 million, if the quality of the applications supported the increase. We aim to announce decisions over the award of grant early next February.

Egg producers will also have the opportunity to benefit from the allocation of more than £40 million over the next seven years to support better marketing and processing of agricultural products, under the EU Rural Development Regulation.

Chicken Imports

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of animal welfare standards among chicken producers who supply the UK from *(a)* Thailand, *(b)* Brazil and *(c)* other countries. [103290]

Mr. Morley: Under Article 8 of Directive 98/58/EC the EU Commission is charged with producing a report comparing animal welfare conditions in the EU with those in non-member countries supplying the Community.

Bovine Somatotropin

Mr. Pike: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the moratorium on the use of BST in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* the EU; and if he will make a statement. [102762]

Ms Quin: A report by the Government's independent scientific advisory body, the Veterinary Products Committee (VPC), was published on 11 October and a copy of the report was placed in the Library of the House. We accepted the VPC's advice to support a continuation of the moratorium or equivalent measures which prohibit the use of recombinant BST. The European Commission has proposed a ban on the use of the recombinant BST with effect from 1 January 2000. The Government supports that proposal.

Pet Passports

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if, in relation to the pet passport scheme, the French Government have agreed to his Department's officials carrying out inspections in French ports. [102713]

Ms Quin: Discussions regarding arrangements for the surveillance of carrier activities participating in the pet passport pilot scheme to be introduced next year are still continuing.

Departmental Employees (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of the total workforce in his Department is of ethnic minority origin; and what steps he is taking to encourage the employment of people from the ethnic minorities in his Department. [102604]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* As at 1 April 1999, 6.3 per cent. of permanent staff in core MAFF (4.4 per cent. of staff in MAFF including its Agencies) had declared themselves to be of ethnic minority origin.

We encourage the employment of people of ethnic minority origin by a wide range of measures including the use of ethnic minority media as a means of advertising vacancies and attending a number of careers fairs aimed specifically at ethnic minority audiences. We have also recently reviewed and re-issued our Outreach Guidance.

Fish Stocks

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Ministry has made of the reason for the decline in fishing stocks in the last three years by *(a)* stock and *(b)* area. [103666]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Not all fish stocks have declined in the past few years. For example, the large western mackerel stock has increased since 1994, and the Norwegian spring-spawning herring has doubled in size over the same period and has also extended its distribution.

Most of the whitefish stocks however remain at or near historically low levels. This is associated with high levels of fishing mortality. In the North Sea, the recent assessments indicate some reduction of fishing mortality on roundfish, which will help to restore those stocks.

All fish stocks are subject to great variations in the numbers of young produced each year. This variation is caused by changes in the size of the mature adult stock and annual changes in the environment being more or less favourable to the survival of larval fish. So even though stocks may be at generally low levels good or bad recruitment of young fish will cause the stocks to increase or decrease over periods of a few years.

Against this background of variation, some sea areas have experienced a general warming. While this may be favourable for some stocks, such as sole, it has apparently adversely affected the production of young cod, especially in the North Sea and in the Irish Sea.

Fisherman (Prosecutions)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many prosecutions there have been of fishermen landing at United Kingdom ports by *(a)* area, *(b)* weight of fish and *(c)* value of fish landed in each of the last five years. [103663]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Offences may be committed by fishermen at sea and on landing into the United Kingdom ports and abroad. Information in the form requested is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Designated Fishing Ports

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what has been the additional cost to his Ministry of operating the designated fishing ports scheme. [103665]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* The cost of operating the designated fishing ports scheme in respect of whitefish and shellfish landings made by UK vessels over 20 metres has been contained within the existing resources for fisheries enforcement.

Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has *(a)* made to and *(b)* received from other European Governments about compatibility of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill with the European Convention on Human Rights. [103553]

Mr. Morley: No such representations have been made or received.

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will set out the basis for his Department's statement on the compatibility of the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill with the European Convention on Human Rights; and if he will place the relevant documents in the Library. [103552]

Mr. Morley: The Government's view is that the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). There are overriding moral arguments in favour of a ban and a general public interest in removing this particular source of livelihood. This has to be balanced against the interests of those whose source of livelihood is being removed and the Bill respects the ECHR by provision of a two to three year winding-down period, compensation for certain categories of loss, and the reference of disputes on compensation to arbitration or the Lands Tribunal. In the Government's view, the balance struck between the demands of the general interest in this matter and the interests of the individuals directly affected is a fair one.

Quota Allocations

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to the Government's reply to the eighth report from the Agriculture Committee, Session 1998–99 on Sea Fishing (HC 141–1) page ix, if he will make a statement on the expression, "with fishermen's interests protected by the legal concept of legitimate expectation". [103157]

Mr. Morley: The rules under which quota allocations are made available to producer organisations and other groups within the fishing industry are the subject of annual consultation with industry representatives. Throughout the 1990s allocations have been linked to previous fishing activity. For most quota stocks, with the introduction of fixed quota allocations, this is now the catches made during the reference period 1994–96.

TREASURY

Objective 1 Funding

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the requirements for match public funds from his Department for the EU Objective 1 regions of *(a)* Cornwall and Scilly, *(b)* Merseyside and *(c)* South Yorkshire for each of the seven years of the programme. [104302]

Mr. Timms: Responsibility for identifying match funding is a matter for project applicants and for the partnerships in the regions concerned. This ensures local ownership and commitment to the projects.

There are numerous possible sources for match funding including local authorities, Government schemes, the voluntary sector and the private sector.

The regional Government Offices are best placed to advise the partnerships on the sources of Government Departments' funding which can be used to match Structural Funds. The Government are updating and improving guidance on match funding.

Queen Mother (Coin)

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans Her Majesty's Government have to issue a coin to commemorate the hundredth year of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother. [104427]

Mr. Gordon Brown: Her Majesty The Queen has been graciously pleased to approve my recommendation that a crown piece should be issued this year in celebration of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother achieving her hundredth year. Collector versions of the coin will be available from early in the new year and the coin will also be available, later in the year, from banks and post offices at its face value of £5.

Census

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the draft Census Order for England and Wales will be laid before Parliament, if questions on religion, ethnic group and income are to be included in the proposed content of the Census; and if he will make a statement. [104428]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Draft Order in Council providing for a Census to be taken in England and Wales on Sunday 29 April 2001 has today been laid before Parliament. This Order specifies the persons by whom and with respect to whom returns are to be made and the topics on which questions are to be asked.

The Government's proposals for the 2001 census were published in a White Paper (Cm 4253) in March this year. All the topics that were then proposed for England and Wales are included in the draft Order with the exception of religion. A change to the Census Act 1920 is necessary to permit a question on religion to be asked. A Bill to amend the Census Act to this effect was introduced in the House of Lords on 16 December 1999. If this is passed in time it is planned to include a question in the 2001 Census.

A question on ethnic group is proposed in the Draft Census Order. The ethnic group question was one of the main successes of the 1991 Census, and the question for the forthcoming census has since been extensively researched and tested, both to meet users' requirements for additional information about people of mixed origin and sub-groups within the "White" population, particularly the "Irish", and to be as acceptable as possible to respondents. The new response categories are to provide optimum comparability with information from the 1991 Census question while, at the same time, attempting to improve response to the question among the many different ethnic minority communities.

Consultation with users about requirements for information from the census has indicated that there is widespread support for the inclusion of an income question from key Government Departments, local government and others. But the strength of such requirements must be balanced against the possible public disquiet about the acceptability of such a question in a compulsory Census, the doubts about the reliability of the information collected, and the availability of possible alternative sources of the information. The Draft Order for England and Wales therefore does not include an income question.

A copy of the 2001 Census Form will be included as part of the Census Regulations to be made following the Census Order.

As the Census is a devolved issue, similar arrangements are being made in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total value of receipts since May 1997 from the windfall tax on the privatised utilities. [104256]

Mr. Timms: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the former Financial Secretary my hon. Friend the Minister for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), to my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) on 28 January 1999, *Official Report*, column 344W.

Red Diesel

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 433W, concerning diesel fuel, (103015), what guidance has been issued to road hauliers regarding the use of Norwegian diesel. [104145]

Mr. Timms: No specific guidance has been issued in respect of Norwegian diesel. Notice 75, 'Fuel for diesel vehicles', issued by Customs and Excise gives advice on what fuels can be legally used in a diesel-engined road vehicle. This notice is freely available from Excise and Inland Customs Advice Centres.

Art Sales

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the likely effect of the introduction of a pre-eminence standard for claims for the conditional exemption of works of art on the number of works being sold. [101854]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 December 1999]:* None.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103857]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury's Public Service Agreement includes the following range of measures for increasing productivity within the Department, and hence saving running costs:

a programme for reviewing all services and activities systematically over five years under the Better Quality Services initiative announced in the Modernising Government White Paper. The Public Service Agreement commits the Treasury to completing 60 per cent. of reviews by March 2003.

an information strategy review, examining internal business processes and best working practices, and adoption of recommendations on better inter-departmental co-ordination.

a reduction in the number and length of unfilled vacancies.

a new robust system for recording sickness absence.

moving to electronic publishing of information material previously published on paper.

increasing the proportion of business undertaken electronically in accordance with Government targets.

- a review of the application of procurement techniques to expenditure, including electronic procurement of standard goods, paying suppliers electronically, and collaborating in joint procurement projects when they offer better value.

The Treasury's gross running costs provision for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 is set out in its Public Service Agreement. The productivity measures listed above will enable the Department to increase the quantity and quality of outputs delivered by its running costs expenditure over this period.

Gold Reserves

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the value of the gold held in the national reserves. [104260]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Table 2 of the Quarterly Report on UK Official Holdings of Foreign Currency and Gold for the period July to September 1999, published on 2 December 1999, provides a breakdown of the size and composition of the United Kingdom's reserve holdings, including gold.

Economic Policies

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, (1) pursuant to Cm 4181, page 115, No. xiv, what criteria he will use to determine whether high-growth business start-ups are successful; [104348]

(2) pursuant to Cm 4181, page 115, No. xi, how he will measure improvement in the value for money in public procurement; [104347]

(3) pursuant to Cm 4181, page 114, No. iii, by how much he aims to reduce the variability of the economic cycle, and on what measurement; [104322]

(4) pursuant to Cm 4181, page 115, No. viii, how the productivity of *(a)* the public services overall and *(b)* individual departments will be measured year on year; [104321]

(5) pursuant to Cm 4181, page 115, No. x, how he will measure the acceptance of the standard framework for public private partnership contracts; [104346]

(6) if he will make a statement on the UK's preparations for entering the euro, with particular reference to Treasury performance target xxxii in Cm 4181; [104350]

(7) what criteria he uses to define successful business start-ups, referred to in Cm 4181; [104279]

(8) how achievement of the Treasury performance targets numbered xvii, xx, xxvi and xxix to xxxi, set out in the Public Service Agreements, Cm 4181, will be judged. [104323]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information on how Departments' performances will be assessed against the targets set out in Cm 4181 was published in "The Government's measures of success Output and Performance Analysis" HM Treasury 31 March 1999. The document is also available on the Treasury's website.

Pensions Mis-selling

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many claims arising from the mis-selling of pensions are outstanding; and what assessment he has made of the timescale for their resolution; [104314]

(2) how many claims arising from the mis-selling of pensions have been resolved to date; [104315]

(3) how many people have been affected by the mis-selling of pensions in the last 10 years. [104313]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The regulators split the industry's work on the personal pension mis-selling review into two phases. During phase 1 firms were required to address the most urgent cases, where for example pensioners had died, or retired, or were close to retirement. Phase 2—which began in 1999—addresses less urgent cases, mostly younger people.

The mis-selling of personal pensions took place during the period April 1998-June 1994 and the statistics given in this answer cover the mis-selling over that period. It is not practical to provide figures for the period from January 1990. The people affected by personal pension mis-selling are those who were mis-sold a pension and who were subsequently entitled to redress.

The phase 1 review has led to offers of redress to 410,000 people. About 17,000 phase 1 cases are outstanding. This represents about 2 per cent. of all the cases included in the phase 1 review. These are typically difficult cases or cases which have only recently been identified as proper to phase 1. The Financial Services Authority closely monitors the firms responsible for these outstanding phase 1 cases.

The total population to be examined under phase 2 is in excess of 800,000. About 114,000 cases have already been dealt with, and offers of redress have been made in about 90,000 cases. About 700,000 further cases are likely to be dealt with during the rest of the phase 2 review. Not all of these investors will be entitled to redress. The timetable is for all phase 2 case reviews to be completed by June 2002.

It is too soon to say how many investors overall are likely to be offered redress under the two phases of the review.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 11 January 2000

TREASURY

National Savings Agency

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to review the National Savings Agency by March 2000. [104622]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Following a prior options review in 1995, National Savings became a next steps agency in 1996. The Government announced then that the next five-yearly review would take place by March 2000.

I have asked my officials to set this review in motion. It will be conducted in accordance with the latest guidance from the Cabinet Office's Modernising Public Services Group.

The terms of reference of the review are: to review the performance of National Savings since it became an agency in 1996, and to advise Treasury Ministers on the options for the future status of National Savings, with a view to securing the best outcome for the public sector and for the wider economy.

In considering these options, the review will take into account the views of affected stakeholders and assess the implications for:

the net cost/benefit to the public sector and to the UK economy as a whole;

the Government's wider funding policy objectives;

developments in the wider public sector, including the "Modernising Government" White Paper;

the retail savings market, including the impact of new technology;

the wider policies of the Government, including its policy on savings and on social exclusion;

National Savings' business relationships, including the outsourcing contract with Siemens Business Services and its contract with Post Office Counters Ltd.;

the staff of National Savings;

the need for, and requirements of, legislation; and

the speed with which change can be implemented.

Once this first phase of the analysis is complete, and the outcome agreed, the second phase of the review will build on the earlier analysis to identify where changes are needed to improve future delivery of Government objectives, and to determine how best to implement those changes.

The review will be conducted by the Treasury working in collaboration with National Savings. The first phase will conclude by March 2000.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Bilateral Concordat

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the bilateral concordat between the Department of Social Security and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales. [104452]

Mr. Darling: I am pleased to announce that the First Secretary and I have agreed the text of the concordat between the Department of Social Security and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales. Copies of the concordat have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses, and the text will be available on the DSS website in both English and Welsh.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Sub-post Offices

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from Salisbury District Council about the future of sub-post offices. [104118]

Mr. Alan Johnson: None.

Objective 2 Status

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received on the criteria for granting Objective 2 status. [103288]

Mr. Caborn: Following the submission of our proposed Objective 2 areas to the European Commission in October, we received a few representations from MPs and local authorities requesting further details on the criteria used. In addition, the Isle of Wight has brought judicial review proceedings challenging the Objective 2 proposals submitted to the European Commission.

Postal Services Commission

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consultation with industry will be undertaken in the appointment of *(a)* the members, *(b)* the Chairman and *(c)* the Chief Executive of the Postal Services Commission. [104181]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Chairman and ordinary members of the Postal Services Commission are being appointed in accordance with the Code of Practice of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. For the Chief Executive post civil service procedures are being used.

Nuclear Industry

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received from *(a)* trade unions and *(b)* former workers in the nuclear power industry about health and safety risks in relation to outsourcing. [104147]

Mrs. Liddell: There have been none.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many production incidents were reported at Magnox and advanced gas-cooled reactors in 1999; how many reactors had to be shut down; and for what length of time. [104137]

Mrs. Liddell: There are 35 reactors operating at 16 nuclear power stations across Great Britain. During 1999, production was interrupted by unplanned shutdowns (either automatic or by power station operators) on 78 occasions. All except 15 of these were for 10 days or less. The remainder ranged from 10 to 259 days.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many staff have been shed by the nuclear power industry since its privatisation; and what reports he has received from the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate in respect of *(a)* Magnox and *(b)* advanced gas-cooled reactors visited in 1999 concerning the (i) number of redundancies and (ii) adequacy of training of employed contractors. [104136]

Mrs. Liddell: Since the privatisation of British Energy in 1996, it has shed just over 1,000 jobs. The Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate have not published any reports on either redundancies or the adequacy of training of employed contractors. I understand that the Health and Safety Executive will shortly be publishing its safety management audit of British Energy.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he has taken in response to the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate's findings on the impact of staff redundancies on the safety of the nuclear power industry; and if he will make a statement. [104146]

Mrs. Liddell: I have not received any report from the Health and Safety Executive's Nuclear Installations Inspectorate on the impact of staff redundancies on safety in the nuclear power industry.

SMART Budget

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the gross funding allocated by the Government for the SMART budget for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–00. [103221]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The budgets for the SMART programme excluding the winding down of Regional Enterprise Grants and the transfer of residual commitments from the Department of Environment to DTI were as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1997–98	23.9
1998–99	27.3
1999–2000	31.6

Coal (Imports)

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what tonnage of imported steam coal was landed at Hunterston Port in Ayrshire, Scotland in the years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99; and in which countries it originated, giving the tonnages for each country. [102605]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* Information on imports of coal by port and country of origin are available only for trade from outside the EC. Similar information on intra-EC trade is not collected.

Data on steam coal imports into Hunterston are not recorded separately. However, imports into Greenock Port which includes Hunterston are available and are set out as follows, together with imports through all Scottish ports.

Steam coal imports from outside the EC

Million tonnes

Port	*Country of origin*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Greenock[1]	Australia	—	0.3	0.7
	Colombia	0.7	0.9	1.0
	South Africa	0.1	0.3	1.0
	Others[2]	0.1	—	—
	Total	0.8	1.5	2.7
All Scottish ports	Australia	—	0.3	0.7
	Colombia	0.7	0.9	1.0
	South Africa	0.1	0.3	1.0
	Others[2]	0.1	—	—
	Total	0.9	1.5	2.7
All UK ports		8.4	10.1	12.2

[1] Greenock includes the following ports: Annan, Barcaldine, Campbeltown, Faslane, Finnart, Furnace, Garlieston, Hunterston, Islay, Oban, Palnackie, Stranraer.
[2] Others are Indonesia, Poland and the United States of America
[3] Less than 50,000 tonnes
[4] Nil

PRIME MINISTER

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister (1) what plans he has to review the application of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information in respect of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee; [104112]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 353W, concerning attendance at the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee on 13 December, what steps he plans to take in respect of persons disclosing information about attendance at Joint Cabinet Committees to the Press. [104117]

The Prime Minister: I have no such plans.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister how many breaches of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information have been identified in respect of the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee since its inception. [104115]

The Prime Minister: None. The code would be breached only by a refusal to disclose information which should properly be made public.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

SRB (West Midlands)

15. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact of the Single Regeneration Budget in tackling disadvantage in the West Midlands. [103266]

Ms Armstrong: There has not been a central Government evaluation of the impact of the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) in the West Midlands. However, the national evaluation of the first two rounds of the SRB includes case studies on two West Midlands SRB partnerships—the West Midlands Industrial Club and Regenerating Wolverhampton.

Nature Conservation

16. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department is taking to afford greater protection to sites of importance for nature conservation; and if he will make a statement. [103267]

Mr. Meacher: In line with proposals in the Government's Framework for Action on Sites of Special Scientific Interest, officials have set up a Local Sites Review Group, comprising a wide range of interested bodies. This will consider the issues associated with the identification, protection and management of local sites and report its conclusions early this year.

East Coast Main Line

17. **Sir Robert Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has in respect of the upgrading of the east coast main line from Edinburgh to Aberdeen. [103268]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans at present. However, we have asked the Franchising Director to replace passenger franchises that expire within the next three to four years in order to generate new investment and service improvements. Discussions for a new Great North Eastern Railways franchise, including future infrastructure and service requirements for the entire East Coast Main Line, will be starting soon with Seacontainers the current operator and Virgin Rail Group in conjunction with Stagecoach.

32. **Mr. Malcolm Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on what measures he proposes to take to upgrade the east coast main line service between Edinburgh and Aberdeen. [103284]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans at present. However, we have asked the Franchising Director to replace passenger franchises that expire within the next three to four years in order to generate new investment and service improvements. Discussions for a new Great North Eastern Railways franchise, including future infrastructure and service requirements for the entire East Coast Main Line, will be starting soon with the current operator and any other interested parties.

Waste Disposal (East Sussex)

18. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on waste disposal, with particular reference to East Sussex. [103269]

Mr. Mullin: The Government's policy for sustainable waste management, including waste disposal, is set out in the draft national waste strategy, "A Way With Waste". The final version will be published shortly and we expect local authorities throughout England to have regard to its goals in developing strategies for managing waste in their areas. I understand plans are being developed in East Sussex to meet the goals set out in "A Way With Waste", and I welcome this.

Rough Sleepers

19. **Jane Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on how he intends to reduce the number of rough sleepers on the streets. [103271]

23. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to ensure that people do not have to sleep rough on the streets. [103275]

Ms Armstrong: On 15 December, we published the Government's strategy for reducing the numbers of rough sleepers in England by at least two thirds by 2002. Copies of the document "Coming in from the Cold" are available in the Library.

London Underground

20. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the latest estimated date for the finalisation of the Government's plans for London Underground. [103272]

Mr. Hill: London Underground has made good progress in developing the public private partnership: bids for the deep-tube lines are due back in March; expressions of interest for the sub-surface lines are due later this month; (and those for the property partnership are due in February). We have consistently made clear that we will not be bound by specific dates for the completion of the PPP.

Regeneration Programmes

21. **Ms Blears:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what support he is providing to encourage local people to take an active part in regeneration programmes. [103273]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We are working with the relevant national, regional and local bodies to encourage local people to take an active part in the regeneration of their local communities. We are providing funding support, in particular for capacity building and community involvement, through our domestic regeneration programmes and European Structural Funds in eligible areas.

Coalfield Areas

22. **Mr. Todd:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to regenerate former coalfield areas. [103274]

Ms Beverley Hughes: On 1 December 1998 at the second Coalfields Conference in Peterlee, County Durham, the Deputy Prime Minister announced a 10 year programme to regenerate coalfield communities with an investment package of £354 million over three years. A fuller breakdown of this investment and further steps to

be taken are set out in "Making the Difference—A new Start for England's Coalfield Communities: The Government's Response to the Coalfields Task Force Report".

The Deputy Prime Minister published a further report at the third Coalfields Conference in Wigan on 18 October 1999, in less than a year since Peterlee, setting out progress on delivery of the recommendations of the Coalfields Task Force. Copies of both these documents have been placed in the Library of the House.

Single Regeneration Budget

24. **Mrs. Ann Cryer:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact of the Single Regeneration Budget in combating disadvantage. [103276]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Analysis from the interim national evaluation of the first two rounds of the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) has shown that the initiative is delivering a good mix of economic, social, community and environmental benefits in deprived areas. Taking into account the severity of the problems in SRB partnership areas, these benefits are being delivered cost effectively.

Eastern Regional Development Agency

25. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from the Eastern Regional Development Agency. [103277]

Ms Armstrong: The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) has submitted its strategy for the East of England, "Moving Forward" and its Corporate Plan. It has also commented on draft Planning Policy Guidance 11 and on Round 6 of the Single Regeneration Budget.

Planning Inspectorate

26. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his proposals to improve the Planning Inspectorate's service to the public. [103278]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Planning Inspectorate strives continuously to improve its service to the public. They have dramatically improved handling times for deciding planning appeals and are well on the way to achieving the Public Service Agreement targets which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in March 1999. Improvements to the procedure for processing planning appeals will be implemented during 2000–01. A consultation paper on proposals to improve the processing of enforcement appeals was published last month. The Inspectorate are converting all of their guidance leaflets into Plain English and have been awarded seven crystal marks by the Plain English Campaign. The Inspectorate will continue to invest in new IT systems and will be relaunching their website shortly.

Housing

27. **Dr. Stoate:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage local planning authorities to build new homes in existing town centres. [103279]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We are revising our planning policy guidance on housing (PPG3) to encourage more housing to be provided in town centres and the conversion and reuse of buildings not currently in housing use, and the re-use of premises above shops. We have commissioned research to identify the impediments to mixed-use and housing developments in town centres, the results of which will be published later this year.

Train Overcrowding

28. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he next plans to meet the Health and Safety Executive to discuss train overcrowding. [103280]

Mr. Hill: I have no plans to discuss train overcrowding with the Health and Safety Executive, who regard this issue as primarily one of passenger comfort and not safety.

Construction Industry

29. **Mr. Paul Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on improving innovation and quality in the construction industry. [103281]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We are working closely with clients and the supply side to improve the performance of the construction industry by stimulating innovation and process improvement along the lines recommended in Sir John Egan's report "Rethinking Construction".

Demonstration projects to a value of around £3 billion have been put forward covering almost every aspect of construction by local authorities, housing associations, central Government Departments and agencies and by many private sector clients and suppliers.

National Air Traffic Services

30. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of *(a)* proposals from the airlines for the corporate restructuring of the NATS and *(b)* the prospect of achieving consensus on such proposals across the wider air transport industry. [103282]

Mr. Mullin: The Government have not received any formal proposals from the airlines about the restructuring of NATS. The NATS PPP will be put in place following a competitive tender process and, should they choose to bid, any proposal from the airlines will be considered as part of that process. The responses to our consultation on the NATS PPP show that there is broad support for the Government' s proposals from the aviation industry.

Climate Change

31. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on climate change. [103283]

Mr. Meacher: Climate change remains high on the Government's agenda and we are pressing ahead with the development of an ambitious UK climate change programme, a draft of which will be published shortly for

consultation. We have already introduced many new and innovative policies that will reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases.

Passenger Information

33. **Ms Ryan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on measures taken to provide the travelling public with a one-stop national passenger information system. [103285]

Mr. Hill: The national public transport information system is being developed by partnerships of transport operators and local authorities.

Government have provided Supplementary Credit Approvals to local authorities of £1 million in 1998–99 and £3.3 million in 1999–2000 to assist with the capital requirements of the project.

The service is expected to be introduced progressively throughout Great Britain during 2000.

Planning System (Competition)

34. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is on taking account of competition issues within the planning system. [103286]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The planning system is expected to be positive in promoting competition while ensuring the protection of the environment and amenity. It is required to treat all applications for planning consent even-handedly and to determine them on their planning merits.

Playing Fields

35. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his Department's policy to discourage the development of playing fields currently being used for sport. [103287]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Planning Policy Guidance note 17: Sport and Recreation already emphasises the special significance of playing fields and that they should normally be protected. The Town and Country Planning (Playing Fields)(England) Direction 1998 requires referral to the Secretary of State of planning applications for development of local authority-owned playing fields or those currently, or in the previous five years, in educational use, where Sport England has objected but the local planning authority is minded to grant permission. The Secretary of State then has the opportunity to call in the application for his own determination.

School Crossing Patrols

36. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to increase the powers of school crossing patrols. [103289]

Mr. Hill: My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions announced on 18 November 1998 that School Crossing Patrols would be given increased powers so that they can help any child or adult across the road and that the time restrictions on when they can operate will be removed.

The proposal to extend the powers of school crossing patrols was included in our White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone". It is a clear commitment. We will implement this proposal when a suitable legislative opportunity arises.

Local Authority Purchases (Inflation Rate)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the current rate of inflation for the basket of goods and services purchased by local authorities. [103259]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Employee costs account for more than half of local authorities' costs, and this year's pay settlements affecting local authorities are in the region of 2 to 3.6 per cent. Local authorities will continue to benefit from the low inflation and stable economy being delivered by the good economic management this Government provides as well as the predictability that the three year settlement has provided.

Climate Change Levy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received from industry and business concerning the effects of the climate change levy. [103270]

Mr. Meacher: We receive many representations from business on the climate change levy and have been taking these into consideration in our development of detailed proposals. We have also issued a number of consultation papers, the latest—which invites comments on the Government's proposals for a £150 million business energy efficiency programme and tax relief scheme for investment in energy saving technologies—was published on 9 December 1999. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House.

Trams (Croydon)

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to issue an exemption order for the fleet of trams to be introduced into service in Croydon in respect of the provisions of the Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations 1998. [104620]

Mr. Hill: As my predecessor explained in her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) on 9 March 1999, *Official Report*, column 167W, we are expecting to receive a number of exemption applications from train and tram operating companies whose designs for new rail vehicles were well advanced prior to the 1998 Regulations coming into force.

We have received an application from Tramtrack Croydon Ltd. relating to the new trams they wish to introduce on Croydon Tramlink. The exemptions have been discussed with our statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee. An exemption Order relating to the exemption of these trams was laid in Parliament yesterday. Copies are available from the Library.

The exemptions will not prevent disabled people from using the new trams or trains. Indeed, we believe that their introduction will make a significant contribution to improving mobility opportunities for disabled people.

Rural Bus Challenge 1999

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the results of the 1999 Rural Bus Challenge competition. [104623]

Mr. Prescott: I am pleased to announce today approval of the 58 projects listed below which were submitted as bids by local authorities in this competition. This follows careful consideration of a total of 124 bids submitted by authorities. Funding for the successful bids will total £16.78 million. A Special Grant Report under Section 88b of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 will be put forward for Parliamentary approval as soon as possible.

Authority	*Value (£)*	*Title of Bid*
Bath and NE Somerset	801,127	Enhanced Bus Services
Buckinghamshire	985,000	Easybus Project
Cheshire	632,388	Demand Responsive Rural Community Transport Strategy
Cornwall	100,000	The Helston-Redruth Branch Line Bus Service
	57,270	The Gorran and District Ring-and-Ride Service
Cumbria	722,000	Cumbrian Connexion
Derbyshire	155,000	Public Transport Information Technology
Devon	640,000	Buses are Cool
East Riding	423,300	MediBus Network
East Sussex	102,000	North Lewes District Rural Taxibus Partnership
Gloucestershire	998,900	IMPACT—Improving Accessible Transport
Greater Manchester	312,000	Rural Transport Operators
Hampshire	169,457	Fully Integrated Brockenhurst
Herefordshire	78,000	Home Hopper
Hertfordshire	107,000	Accessible Taxis Rural Areas Partnership
	180,000	Multi-purpose Accessible Vehicles in Rural Areas
Kent	381,000	Swale Unified Network (SUN)
Lancashire	106,733	Rural Intelligent Bus Stop System
	280,999	Garstang "Super 8" Variable Route Minibus Service
Lincolnshire	940,962	Spalding-Kings Lynn
	680,687	Lincoln-Boston
Merseyside	12,600	Satellite Tracking and Communications Equipment
Norfolk	478,800	Quality Bus Partnership (Kings Lynn-Hunstanton)
North Lincolnshire	88,095	Brigg Bus Stop Infrastructure Improvements
North Yorkshire	43,200	Whixley Area Community Transport Project
Northamptonshire	221,850	East Northants Community Bus and Trailer Project
	204,550	Cross County Quality Bus Partnership
	61,550	Wellinborough Rural Door-to-Door Service
Northumberland	74,000	Access to Journey Planner
Oxfordshire	62,192	Cotswold Line Taxi-Bus Interchange
	229,100	Wheelchair Accessible Express Coach Feeder and Dial-a-Ride Service in South Oxfordshire
	426,000	Cherwell Valley Taxi-Bus Scheme
	285,000	Integrated Rural Taxi-Bus Links to Bicester North Railway Station
Redcar and Cleveland	5,000	Minibus Turning Circle
Shropshire	21,600	Bike-Bus Demonstration Project
	21,900	Community Transport Information System
Somerset	90,823	West Somerset Social Car Scheme
	25,582	Wells—Priddy Postbus
	225,195	Continuation of Mendip Flexibus Funding
South Gloucestershire	540,300	Strategic Interchange and Local Access Hubs
South Yorkshire	40,478	Hampole and Skelbrooke
	1,342,275	South Rotherham Transport Strategy
Staffordshire	117,500	Gnosall Community Links
Stockton on Tees	12,000	Bus Facilities at Yarm Station
Suffolk	305,122	Wheels Within Wheels
Telford and Wrekin	174,000	Rural Transport Links—The Wrekin Rider
Torbay	142,990	South Devon Hospital Hopper Bus
Tyne and Wear	361,550	Transpods
Warrington	60,000	Car Share Co-ordinator
Warwickshire	155,088	Flexi Bus Routes
West Berkshire	75,700	Taxi-Bus
West Sussex	218,000	Demanding Public Transport
West Yorkshire	208,928	Denby Dale
Wiltshire	642,450	Trans-Wilts Express
	453,160	Royal United Hospital Demand Responsive Taxi-Bus Service
	58,000	Wigglybus
Worcestershire	404,049	Route Enhancement: Service 382
	36,500	Bus Passenger Escort Scheme
58 Schemes	16,778,950	

Garden Composters

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what evidence he has obtained as to whether councils which have provided, free, subsidised or cost price garden composters have ensured the equipment has been used for 12 months or longer. [104294]

Ms Armstrong: None. This is a matter for individual councils.

Fluorescent Lights

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of used fluorescent lights from Government buildings are recycled. [104293]

Mr. Meacher: The percentage is small. Only some 25,000 fluorescent tubes have been recycled under the Government-wide call off contract which the Disposal Sales Agency awarded to Biffa Waste Services Limited in June 1998. The potential market was estimated at 800,000 tubes a year. But contracts of this nature take time to bed down. The extra cost of recycling is deterring some premises managers from using the contract. Others are bound by existing contracts and must wait until they expire. The time intervals for replacing tubes can also vary between two and several years depending on circumstances. There are also logistical considerations such as storage space. Efforts continue to encourage managers to use the contract.

Commonhold Legislation

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce commonhold legislation. [104264]

Mr. Mullin: As was announced in the gracious speech given on 17 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 4–7, the Government will be publishing a draft joint Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill for consultation during this session. The Commonhold aspects of the draft Bill are the responsibility of my right hon. noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor.

Footpath Network

Mr. Casale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to include the pedestrian footpath network in London within the scope of his report on improving rights of way in England and Wales. [104261]

Mr. Mullin: Our consultation paper, "Improving Rights of Way in England and Wales", was sent to all the local authorities in London and a number of London organisations. We are considering their responses carefully, together with almost 2000 others, in preparing new legislation on rights of way.

Tenants

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given to local authorities about improving the quality of life of their tenants through estate management. [104052]

Mr. Mullin: This Department has been represented on several of the policy action teams (PATs) set up in response to the Social Exclusion Unit's report "Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal", including PAT 5 on Housing Management and PAT 8 on Anti-social Behaviour. PAT 5 found that good housing management is crucial in ensuring that tenants in social housing enjoy a high quality of life. The work of both teams will feed into the Social Exclusion Unit's overall strategy on neighbourhood renewal, to be published later this year.

The quality of life for tenants can be greatly improved by involving tenants more effectively and more thoroughly in the management of their homes, including tenant management if that is what the tenants themselves want. From April this year all councils will be introducing tenant participation compacts. This Department published guidance for local authorities in June last year to help them develop, implement and review their local compacts.

We are also broadening our programme of grants paid under section 16 of the Housing and Planning Act 1986 to promote and develop greater participation. Guidance on the full range of grants available for this purpose will be published in the spring.

Under Best Value, local authorities will need to review their housing services, including those relating to estate management, with a view to securing improvements, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. This Department will shortly be publishing guidance for local housing authorities on the application of Best Value to housing.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what administrative measures are available to enforce tenancy agreements between local authorities and their tenants. [104053]

Mr. Mullin: Tenancy agreements set out both the rights, and responsibilities, of tenants. Local authorities should ensure that their agreements are clear and unambiguous, so that there can be no doubt about the standards expected and the circumstances in which the authority will take action if there are problems. In the event of a breach of a tenancy agreement, local authorities may wish to begin possession proceedings using the grounds set out in Part I of Schedule 2 to the Housing Act 1985 (as amended by the Housing Act 1996).

Local authorities may, alternatively, wish to seek an injunction against the tenant concerned to prevent further breaches of the tenancy agreement. The 1996 Act enables the courts to attach a power of arrest to such an injunction if there is violence, or a threat of violence.

Environmental Schemes

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria were applied in determining how many and which environment schemes would be deleted from proposals put to him by the Environment Agency and South West Water; under what statutory authority that decision was made; whether the criteria relating to pollution of the water environment are the same in every region; and if he will make a statement. [104161]

Mr. Mullin: Proposals for investment by water companies in schemes to protect and improve the environment in England were put to the Secretary of State by the Environment Agency as part of the Periodic Review of water company price limits. This is a non-statutory process, led by Ofwat, which sets the price framework by reference, among other factors, to foreseen investment needs over the forthcoming pricing period, in this case 2000–05.

The Director General of Ofwat requested guidance from Ministers about the level of investment which companies should be required to make to achieve environmental objectives within this period. We were advised in that task by the Environment Agency, which put forward a list of specific proposals for consideration. A large proportion of these arose from the need to meet statutory water quality standards, many of them arising from European legislation. All these schemes were included in the programme as a matter of course. On other parts of the programme, principally schemes to improve river water quality and those to improve intermittent sewage discharges, it was possible for the Government to exercise a degree of discretion over the timing or the nature of the objectives.

In "Raising the Quality", which was published in September 1998, we indicated a general aim to eliminate at least half the existing shortfall in compliance with river quality objectives by 2005 and to accelerate the rate of improvement for intermittent discharges, so that at least two thirds of remaining unsatisfactory discharges would be improved by 2005. Within these national objectives, however, the Government made clear it would take a view on the pace of investment for particular companies taking account of the need to avoid unacceptable impacts on water prices in different parts of the country, and to reflect local environmental priorities.

In the south west, where customers were already experiencing water bills considerably higher than for any other water company, and which already had the highest rate of compliance with river quality objectives in England, we decided to undertake a lower proportion of investment to meet river quality objectives and improve intermittent discharges than elsewhere. These decisions were based on assessments of the costs and benefits of the investment schemes concerned. However, the south west will still benefit from a substantial environmental programme, which includes further improvements to protect bathing waters and shellfish waters, key priorities for the region.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the reduction in carbon dioxide emissions over a 10 year period that would be achieved by replacing two 1,200 MW coal-fired power stations with two gas-fired power stations of the same capacity. [104274]

Mr. Meacher: My Department estimates that replacing two 1,200 MW coal fired power stations by two gas fired power stations of the same capacity would save about 75 million tonnes of carbon dioxide over a ten year period, assuming the power stations would operate on base load.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Political Parties (Donations)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to ensure that large donations to political parties are declared. [104183]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Part IV of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill will give effect to our manifesto commitment to require the disclosure of large donations made to political parties. The registered treasurer of a political party will be required to report to the Electoral Commission, on a quarterly basis, the source and amount of donations of £5,000 or more accepted by the central organisation and of £1,000 or more accepted by a constituency association or other sub-unit of the party's organisation.

In the immediate run up to a general election, reports must be submitted on a weekly basis. All donations so reported would be included on a register of recordable donations, which will be open to public inspection.

In addition, Part IX of the Bill amends the Companies Act 1985 so as to strengthen the requirements on companies to disclose, in the directors' report, donations to political parties which, in aggregate, exceed £200 in a financial year.

Correspondence

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to letters to the Asylum Directorate from Powell and Co., dated 17 May, 17 June, 8 July, 17 September and 19 October, concerning a constituent (Home Office reference D282723) of the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead; and if he will make a statement. [99771]

Mrs. Roche *[pursuant to her reply, 25 November 1999, c. 179W]:* I now understand that, owing to a regrettable oversight, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate did not send a reply to the letter of 17 May from Powell and Co. There is no trace of any further letters from the solicitors. On 30 November, a final reply was sent to Powell and Co., and I wrote to my hon. Friend on 22 December.

Car Parks

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made toward the improvement of car parks under the secured car parks scheme. [104266]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As at 31 December 1999, 544 car parks in England and Wales had achieved awards under the secured car parks scheme. Car parks with award status have shown substantial reductions in crime, with a sample showing average reductions of 70 per cent.

Additional Government funding of £150 million over three years for closed circuit television has been made available. Improving car park security was a priority for the first round and 31 bids with a car park element (and a capital value of £3 million) were approved under fast-track procedures. In addition, an award of £1.95 million has been made to London Underground to upgrade 58 car parks to award status.

Escaped Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women prisoners (i) have escaped from custody during their sentence in each of the last five years and (ii) have not been recaptured. [104048]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is set out in the tables. The numbers of escapes exclude recaptures within 15 minutes where no further offence has been committed. Figures are for financial years and the escape figures for 1999–2000 show the position to the end of December 1999. The recapture data are as accurate as possible, but some escapers may be recaptured or be arrested for other offences and re-enter the system without a link to the previous incident being made or reported.

	Escapes from prisons		*Number of escapers not recaptured at 31 December 1999*	
Year	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*
1995–96	52	0	5	0
1996–97	33	0	7	0
1997–98	22	1	0	0
1998–99	27	1	2	0
1999–2000	21	4	3	0

	Escapes from escorts		*Number of escapers not recaptured at 31 December 1999*	
Year	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*
1995–96	68	2	6	0
1996–97	98	0	4	0
1997–98	82	0	22	0
1998–99	57	5	14	1
1999–2000	49	2	15	0

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what support he has offered to local authorities accepting asylum seekers. [104258]

Mrs. Roche: The Government have made special grants available to local authorities to help meet unavoidable additional costs incurred in accommodating and supporting asylum seekers under the Children Act 1989 and the National Assistance Act 1948 who are not otherwise entitled to social benefit. On a weekly basis, these grants are currently up to £150 for a single adult and £220 for a family. The responsibility for the payment of these grants—except those for unaccompanied asylum seeking children—passed to the Home Office in April 1999. Home Office officials have also provided direct support over the past year to the Local Government Association (LGA) and local authorities to devise and operate arrangements to disperse asylum seekers away from those areas under most pressure.

With effect from 1 April 2000, the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 provides for destitute asylum seekers and their dependants to be supported and accommodated by the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Through regional consortia, local authorities will still have a key role to play in co-ordinating the provision of accommodation and support services to destitute asylum seekers in their area. To help achieve what is known as the enabling role, Regional Consortia will be eligible to receive up to £40,000 this year and up to £100,000 annually thereafter in grant.

Puppy Farmers

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action his Department is taking in respect of unscrupulous puppy farmers. [104393]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Commercial dog breeding establishments have to be licensed by local authorities under the Breeding of Dogs Act 1973, as amended by the Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999. It is an offence to be in breach of any of the licence conditions aimed at ensuring satisfactory welfare standards for the dogs involved. There are inspection powers for suspected unlicensed premises under the Breeding of Dogs Act 1991.

The Home Office has recently issued guidance to local authorities about administration and enforcement of this legislation.

Metropolitan Police (Disciplinary Hearings)

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is the policy of the Metropolitan Police henceforth to allow officers facing a discipline hearing the assistance, if requested, of a representative of the Black Police Association in addition to the Police Federation. [103917]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner informs me that it is Metropolitan Police policy to comply with the Police Regulations, and Home Office guidance, on disciplinary hearings.

The Police (Discipline) Regulations 1985, which cover incidents occurring before 1 April 1999, provide that a member of a police force may assist the legal representative at the hearing. The Police (Conduct) Regulations 1999, for incidents after 1 April 1999, provide that in addition to having his or her case conducted by a legal representative, the officer may be accompanied at the hearing by a member of a police force or a friend. The role of the friend is to assist the officer in defending the case.

If the officer asks to have more than one friend present at a misconduct hearing, the presiding officer will base any decision on representations from the officer concerned. If the request is agreed, the second friend will be acting as an observer and not a second advocate to question witnesses on behalf of the officer concerned.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department from what date all members of the Metropolitan Police discipline tribunals involving accusations of racism will have had anti-racism training. [103918]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Metropolitan Police Commissioner informs me that all of his officers who are eligible to sit on police discipline tribunals as assessors under the Police Act 1996 have received training in the relevant Home Office guidance and regulations, including dealing with racially discriminatory behaviour.

DEFENCE

DERA (PPP Proposals)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent meetings Ministers in his Department have had with members and officials of the United States Department of Defense to discuss the public private partnership proposals for the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency; on what date; at which locations; which UK Ministers attended each of these meetings; which members of the United States Government attended these meetings; and for which section of the United States Department of Defense the officials who attended each meeting were working. [103182]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Since 24 August 1999, the Minister for Defence Procurement, Baroness Symons, has met with the following US representatives to discuss the DERA public private partnership proposals:

(a) Hon. L. Buchanan, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition, on 13 September 1999 in London;

(b) Hon. P. Hoeper, the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Research, Development and Acquisition, on 14 September 1999 in London;

(c) Mr. A. Money, the Assistant Secretary of Defence (C31) on 1 October, in London; and

(d) The DoD's nominated focal point for the DERA Public Private Partnership, Dr. C. Dorman, the Chief Scientist of the Office of Naval Research, on 22 November 1999, in London.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when and where British officials and military personnel met US Government officials to discuss the future of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency; and if he will list the names and job descriptions of the British participants. [103407]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Throughout the DERA PPP process there has been substantial and widespread discussion with US Government officials, by a considerable number of British officials and military officers, at meetings in the UK, the US and in other countries during, or in the margins of, multilateral meetings.

A full list of all meetings which may have included discussions on the future of DERA between US Government officials and British participants is not held centrally and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost. However the key meetings held specifically to discuss DERA PPP are summarised as follows:

(a) During the 4–6 November 1998 Mr. G. H. B. Jordan, Deputy Under Secretary (Science and Technology) and Mr. T. Jagger, Director of the DERA Partnering Team briefed a targeted audience of senior DoD political appointees and officials, single service commands and laboratories and government laboratories and agencies.

(b) Mr. C Balmer, the MOD Principal Finance Officer accompanied by Mr. Jordan, Sir John Chisholm, the Chief Executive of DERA and Mr. Jagger visited the US to brief a similar audience at the start of the consultation process, from the 3–7 May 1999.

(c) Mr. Jagger, accompanied by members of MOD's International Research Collaboration division visited the US on 24–28 May 1999.

(d) US DoD officials visited the UK in July and held discussions with Mr. K. Tebbit, the MOD Permanent Secretary, Mr. Balmer, Mr. Jordan, Lieutenant General Sir Edmund Burton, the then Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Systems), Mr. Jagger, Sir John Chisholm and members of their staffs.

(e) Mr. Balmer and Mr. Jagger visited Washington during September to hold further discussions with the DoD.

(f) The DoD's nominated focal point for DERA PPP visited the UK during 15–24 November and held discussions with Mr. Balmer, Mr. Jordan, Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham, the Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (Equipment Capability), Mr. J. Howe, Deputy Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency, Mr. Jagger, Sir John Chisholm and members of their staffs.

Nancekuke Base, Cornwall

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on health problems suffered by former workers at the Nancekuke base in Cornwall. [103940]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) on 11 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 707–08W, concerning the survey conducted by the Registrar General which showed that, up to 1969, the mortality of persons who had been employed at Nancekuke was rather less than the average for England and Wales as a whole. This report was published in full in the answer given to the former hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Pardoe) on 2 November 1970, *Official Report*, columns 294–95W. I also refer my hon. Friend to my previous answer concerning the review of sickness and absenteeism among persons employed at Nancekuke which did not yield any valid conclusions.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Government's decision to allow early release of a document concerning health risks to workers at the Nancekuke base in Cornwall during the 1950s and 1960s. [103939]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The document to which my hon. Friend refers was a report of sickness and absenteeism among persons employed at Nancekuke from 1952 to 1969. The review was conducted by the Registrar General and mentioned briefly in an answer to a question from the former hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Pardoe) on 2 November 1970, *Official Report*, columns 294–95W. The study, which was not classified, was among a number of papers at the Public Record Office which were authorised for early release by the Office for National Statistics in response to a request from a reporter.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received from former workers at the Nancekuke base in Cornwall regarding health risks caused by their contact with poisonous substances during the 1950s and 1960s. [103938]

Mr. Kilfoyle: One claim for compensation has been received by my Department from a former worker at Nancekuke who was accidentally exposed to Sarin GB. I am not aware of any other representations to my Department. I am, however, aware of the two other claims made through the then Department of Health and Social Security in the early 1970s.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the report released by the Office for National Statistics concerning health risks to workers at the Nancekuke base in Cornwall during the 1950s and 1960s. [103941]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The report referred to was based on a review of sickness and absenteeism among persons employed at Nancekuke from 1952 to 1969. While the results could be taken to imply greater absence among industrial staff for some illnesses than might have been expected from the national figures available, the data were considered insufficiently robust to be used as firm evidence of increased ill-health among staff and the results were not published formally. Recent re-examination of the results supports the original conclusions concerning the inadequacy of the data.

Type 45 Destroyer

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when he expects to let the contract for the Type 45 Destroyer; and what the timescale is for the various elements; [103922]

(2) when he expects to let the contract for the second Type 45 Destroyer; to whom it will be let; and what the timescale is for the various elements of the contract. [103923]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 11 January 2000:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about contract placement for the first and second Type 45 destroyers. This matter falls to me to answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

As you are aware, the contract to complete Preparation for Demonstration (PFD) for the Type 45 was placed with Marconi Electronic Systems (MES, now BAe SYSTEMS) on 23 November 1999. BAe SYSTEMS have also been appointed as the Prime Contractor for the Type 45 Programme. It is currently planned to place the Demonstration and First of Class Manufacture (DFM) contract with the Prime Contractor towards the end of 2000, to meet an in-service date for the first-of-class ship of 2007.

The detailed contractual arrangements for the build of the first and subsequent ships of the class remain under consideration with the Prime Contractor and I am therefore unable to be precise about the timing of the contract for the second T45 destroyer or to whom it would be awarded. However, value for money will be the prime factor in any such arrangement and in this regard we are keen to ensure that we retain our ability to conduct effective competition for follow-on Type 45 destroyers. To this end, both Marconi Marine (YSL) Ltd and Vosper Thornycroft will be involved in the PFD contract and, subject to satisfactory progress, also in the subsequent DFM contract with a view to allowing the efficient construction of Type 45s at both yards.

Defence Equipment Exhibition

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what actions his Department took to prevent Pakistan Ordnance Factories from exhibiting brochures at the Defence Systems Equipment International '99 Exhibition at Chertsey; [104158]

(2) what assessment his Department made of Pakistan's ordnance factories' production, with particular reference to anti-personnel land mines, before it was invited to the Defence Systems Equipment International '99 Exhibition. [104298]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Pakistan Ordnance Factories stand at Defence Systems Equipment International '99 (DSEi99) Exhibition was reviewed by MOD officials and, at that time, no literature promoting Anti-Personnel Mines was found. No specific action was therefore required or taken to prevent the company from exhibiting brochures at DSEi99.

Attendance of companies at the show was a matter for the organisers, DSEi Ltd., who assured HMG that they would require that all exhibitions and promotional material would comply with UK legislation, including the Landmines Act 1998, and Government policy. HM Customs and Excise are currently investigating an allegation that Pakistan Ordnance Factories referred to anti-personnel landmines in their promotional material.

Spearfish Torpedoes

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received in the last six months on the mid-life of the Spearfish MoD O warshot heavyweight torpedoes; and what response he has made to suppliers concerning the performance of the torpedoes. [104110]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock dated 11 January 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence asking what representations he has received in the last six months on the mid-life of the Spearfish MoD O warshot heavyweight torpedoes; and what response he has made to suppliers concerning the performance of the torpedoes. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

The main production contract for the supply of the Spearfish Mod O warshot torpedo was placed with GEC-Marconi Ltd (now part of BAe Systems) in December 1994 and deliveries commenced in June 1999. The performance of the torpedoes is being assessed via a series of in-water Production Qualification Trials (PQTs) designed to test discrete aspects of performance within the overall performance requirements of the contract.

BAe Systems is also currently undertaking concept studies to provide support for the SPEARFISH Mod O Heavyweight Torpedo Mid-Life Update programme. No representations have been received from any other supplier about the Mid-Life Update programme.

Joint Rapid Reaction Force Vessels

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what specification was set out in the invitation to tender for the Joint Rapid Reaction Force Roll-On-Roll-Off vessel PFI contract regarding the *(a)* use by bidders of UK seafarers, *(b)* commitment to recruitment by bidders of seafarers from traditional UK maritime communities, *(c)* use by bidders of non-UK seafarers, *(d)* commitment of bidders to the training initiatives recently announced by the Government, *(e)* training opportunities for officers and ratings to be provided on the vessels and *(f)* management of the health, safety and employment welfare of crews. [104088]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Sir Robert Walmsley to Mr. Ivan Henderson, dated 11 January 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the specification set out in the invitation to tender for the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces Roll-on-Roll-Off vessel PFI contract. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

Under PFI arrangements, it will be for bidders to provide and manage the service, including the provision of appropriately-trained crews. The invitation to tender did not cite a specification for the issues listed in the question, although bidders have been asked to price the provision of British seamen who would be eligible for call-out as Sponsored Reserves. Bidders would be free to crew the vessels as they wished when trading commercially. A decision on whether or not the MoD requires the use of Sponsored Reserves for Joint Rapid Reaction Forces operations or exercises will be taken in the light of the evaluation of the bids.

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will announce the award of the PFI contract for the Joint Rapid Reaction Force Roll-On Roll-Off vessels. [104090]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Our current intention is to place a contract in summer 2000 for Roll-on Roll-off vessels to support the Joint Rapid Reaction Force.

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contingency plans have been made to meet the needs of the armed forces in the event of any delay in *(a)* the awarding of the PFI contract for the Joint Rapid Reaction Force Roll-On Roll-Off vessels and *(b)* the delivery of the vessels. [104091]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The project is on track to achieve the placing of the contract in summer 2000. We have always planned to provide an interim service from October 2000, through charter arrangements, until the new service was available. In the event of a delay to the delivery of the vessels, these arrangements could be extended to cover the gap.

EU Defence Expenditure

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current annual level of defence expenditure of each member state of the European Union. [100834]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

NORTHERN IRELAND

RUC Special Branch

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many officers attached to RUC Special Branch in September joined the Special Branch in *(a)* each of the last 10 years, *(b)* the previous 15 years and *(c)* the previous 20 years. [101883]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 15 December 1999]:* This information is not readily available and could be provided only at a disproportionate cost.

European Convention on Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what additional training *(a)* the police and *(b)* the Prison Service in Northern Ireland have been given since the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into United Kingdom domestic legislation. [103612]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* A committee chaired by a senior detective has been established within the RUC to examine all aspects of human rights, including training. There has already been close liaison with developments at National Police Training level and contact with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Planning is at an advanced stage for every officer and member of civilian staff to receive training prior to the full implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998.

With regard to the Northern Ireland Prison Service, its strategy is to promote human rights awareness through training and development policies and strategies. The preservation of an individual's human rights throughout their time in prison custody is a running theme in much of the current training programme. Specifically in relation to the Human Rights Act, Prison Service senior managers and members of staff have already attended a range of training courses and seminars on human rights issues. Steps are also being taken to identify the wider extent of individual training requirements and to deliver appropriate training.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

World Cup 2006

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the official engagements carried out by Ministers in support of the England World Cup 2006 bid, indicating the cost to his Department of the support given. [103863]

Kate Hoey: The Government have offered their full support to the Football Association's bid to host the FIFA World Cup in 2006, and various Ministers have hosted a number of receptions on behalf of the bid team. All the receptions hosted by Ministers from his Department were at the expense of the FA bid team.

My predecessor also undertook a number of overseas visits relating to the bid where his expenses were paid for by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. These are as follows:

Date	*Venue*	*Purpose*	*Total cost £*
10–11 June 1997	Paris	Tournoi de France	1,910
10–11 October 1997	Rome	England v Italy Qualifier	2,203
25–31 October 1997	USA\Trinidad\Costa Rica	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	20,434
4–5 December 1997	Marseilles	World Cup Draw	1,211
5–18 February 1998	Tokyo\Seoul\Bangkok	Winter Olympics\Campaign for 2006	21,553

Date	Venue	Purpose	Total cost £
21–23 March 1998	Tunisia	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	0.00
26–29 March 1998	Paraguay\Argentina	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	8,786
19–22 April 1998	Qatar	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	9,150
10–11 June 1998	France	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	379
10–11 July 1998	Paris	Reception at French Embassy by FIFA	1,218
27–29 August 1998	Monte Carlo	Salle Def Etoiles—SCMC UEFA Gala dinner	564
1–2 September 1998	Switzerland	Meeting with President Samaranch and Sepp Blatter	964
5–6 October 1998	Spain	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	1,301
23 October 1998	France	Council of Europe Hearing of Bosman Ruling	421
1–5 November 1998	Cameroon\Mali	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	6,283
12–13 November 1998	Malta	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	45
17 March 1999	Brussels	2006 Bid Meeting	537
22 April-1 May 1999	Nigeria\Botswana\Johannesburg	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	8,922
7–8 May 1999	Malta	2006 plus UK\Malta Sports Week	1,035
25 May-27 June 1999	Barcelona	Championships League Cup Final plus 2006	294
14–17 June 1999	Qatar	World Cup Campaign for 2006 with FA	4,530
6–13 July 1999	Washington, USA	2006 with Anti Doping Discussions	11,040
Total			102,780

Although most of the receptions and visits were specifically related to the 2006 bid, some also encompassed the promotion of British sport as a whole, and fulfilled the duties of the Minister for Sport in this area.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Gibraltar

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the immigration policy operated by the Gibraltar Government in relation to same sex couples; and if he will make a statement. [104107]

Mr. Vaz: Under the 1969 Gibraltar Constitution, the Government of Gibraltar pursue an immigration policy separate from that of the UK, subject to the constraints of EC law.

It is not the policy of the Gibraltar Government to exempt non-EU partners of residents, same sex or otherwise, from the criteria and considerations applicable to applications for residence visas for non-EU nationals generally.

Embassies (Running Costs)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much of the annual running costs of UK embassies in *(a)* the European Union and *(b)* the USA relate to (1) diplomacy, (2) business, (3) visas and (4) other activities, in the last year for which figures are available. [104086]

Mr. Hain: In 1997–98 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's running costs were split between (1) diplomacy, (2) commercial work, (3) visas and (4) other activities in the following way:

Percentage

	Diplomacy	Commercial work	Visas	Other activities
European Union				
Vienna	29	12	5	54
Brussels	39	28	3	31
Copenhagen	30	27	8	36
Dublin	32	17	3	48
Helsinki	31	28	1	40
Paris	20	16	5	59
Bonn	26	2	0.06	72
Athens	18	17	3	62
Rome	20	9	3	68
Luxembourg	38	12	2	49
The Hague	30	22	0	47
Lisbon	21	27	5	48
Madrid	22	16	2	60
Stockholm	36	24	6	34
USA				
Washington DC	63	5	1	31

In subsequent years breakdown of embassy activity is by FCO Objectives, in line with Resource Accounting and Budgeting.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of human rights concerns in Zimbabwe; and what action Her Majesty's Government are taking to address these. [104573]

Mr. Hain: Respect for human rights in Zimbabwe has improved since the low point of the Matabeleland atrocities in the 1980s. Zimbabwe has an active civil society and independent press (albeit harassed at times). However, there have been some serious lapses in the last two years which have coincided with the decline in the economic situation. The arrest and torture of the two *Standard* journalists in January shocked Zimbabweans as well as the international community.

Freedom of assembly is enshrined in the Constitution. The Government have previously used emergency powers to ban strike action, although a Parliamentary Legal Committee subsequently declared the ban to be unconstitutional.

Zimbabwe is a party to all the international human rights conventions, except the convention against torture. Torture, mainly beatings, is regularly used by the police (understaffed and lacking in training) to secure criminal convictions. There is an independent judiciary.

Where there is evidence of human rights abuses, we raise our concerns with the Zimbabwe authorities. In addition, we actively promote freedom of expression by training journalists in the UK. Earlier this year we held a conference on media freedom in Harare. We support a number of NGOs working with the Zimbabwe police to enhance their respect for human rights. We also support good governance projects, and provide equipment and research material to NGOs working to improve people's access to law. We are encouraging the Zimbabweans to accede to the convention against torture.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps have been taken to control the export of television broadcast equipment to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; and if he will make a statement. [104574]

Mr. Vaz: As of 5 January 2000, we have introduced an amendment to the Export of Goods (Control) Order to control the export to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) of television cameras, transmitters, codecs and transposers, satellite earth stations and up-and-down link equipment and transmission link and relay equipment. All applications to export these goods will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

We have introduced the control because of our concerns that companies based in the UK may consider supplying this equipment to the state-run television company in the FRY. This company is a propaganda tool of the Milosevic regime and has been consistently used by the regime to defend and promote its repressive policies, most recently and noticeably during the Kosovo crisis.

Wassenaar Arrangement

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the results of the 1999 Assessment of the Wassenaar Arrangement and the role played by the UK. [104575]

Mr. Vaz: The 1999 Assessment of the operation of the Wassenaar Arrangement was concluded at the Arrangement's annual Plenary in Vienna on 1–3 December. The agreed public statement on the Plenary is available on the Arrangement's website (www.wassenaar.org).

We welcome the decision by Participating States to expand the scope of their reporting on their transfers of certain types of conventional arms. As a result, arms pillar reporting requirements in the Wassenaar Arrangement will now for the first time extend beyond those in the UN Registrar of Conventional Arms. We also welcome the Plenary's decisions to structure the information exchange on the basis of global and regional views—as a result of a proposal by the UK—and to mandate the introduction of a secure electronic information system. These steps will greatly increase the value and accessibility of information exchanged by Participating States.

Despite these positive developments, we regret that proposals to include other types of arms in the reporting requirements, including small arms and light weapons, warships of 150–750 metric tonnes displacement and missiles of less than 25km range, were not agreed due to opposition from a small minority of Participating States. We also regret that the Plenary did not agree that Participating States should provide details of decisions to refuse the transfer of military equipment, or details of end-users in all denial notifications for dual-use goods. We continue to believe that these improvements would significantly enhance the ability of Participating States to identify potentially destabilising transfers or accumulation of conventional arms and dual-use goods.

Throughout the course of the 1999 Assessment, most of which was taken forward in the Arrangement's General Working Group under UK chairmanship, the UK has been at the forefront of efforts to increase the effectiveness of the Wassenaar Arrangement. In particular we co-sponsored and lobbied in support of proposals for a substantive increase in arms pillar transparency. We will continue this year to work for the further expansion of reporting requirements, to include in particular transfers of small arms and light weapons. We will also consider the scope for expanding our existing commitment to volunteer details of our transfers of certain types of conventional arms which are not covered by the mandatory reporting requirements.

CABINET OFFICE

Private Sector Secondments

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many staff were seconded from the private sector to her Department in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to the latest date for which figures are available, stating in each case the companies from which staff have been seconded. [103604]

Mr. Stringer: The numbers of private sector secondees to the Cabinet Office over the last three years follow.

(a) For the period May 1997 to April 1998, five staff were seconded in from BT, Lloyds Bank plc, Marks & Spencer plc, Nat West Bank plc, and KPMG.

(b) For the period May 1998 to April 1999, six staff were seconded in from Andersen Consulting, Marks & Spencer plc, McKinsey & Co., Nat West Bank plc, and Price Waterhouse.

(c) From May 1999, 16 staff are, or have been, seconded in from Andersen Consulting, Barclays Bank plc, BT, Carillion, Hay Management Consultants, KPMG, Marks & Spencer plc, McKinsey & Co., Microsoft Corporation, Nat West Bank plc, Oracle plc, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Unilever, Wragge & Co. Solicitors, and Zurich Financial Services.

Outsourcing Arrangements

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what arrangements she has made to ensure *(a)* the continued input of expertise and *(b)* the effective monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations of the review of major Government IT projects after the expiry of Anne Steward's secondment to the Government. [104243]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The recommendations to improve the delivery of major Government IT projects being developed by the Cabinet Office review team will include a clear statement of which parts of Government will be responsible for their implementation and monitoring.

The study team is consulting widely to draw on the range of expertise available within the Government, and in the private sector and public sector overseas, as its work progresses. It is also considering mechanisms to ensure that expertise is available to public sector projects in the future.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what estimate her Department has made of the impact on the ability of Government Departments to assess bids for the outsourcing of their operations of having previously outsourced all or part of their IT operations. [104244]

Mr. Ian McCartney: All Departments are required to conduct detailed analysis of the costs and benefits of any outsourcing arrangement, including its impact on all aspects of their operation.

The team set up in the Department's Central IT Unit to review major Government IT projects is examining issues relating to the outsourcing of IT functions. The team will make recommendations to ensure that Government IT projects, including outsourcing deals, perform better in the future when it concludes its work in May 2000.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) if she will issue guidance to Government Departments on monitoring the rate of retention of staff of companies to which work has been outsourced by them in the 12 months following the date of the outsourcing; [104245]

(2) what estimate her Department has made of the impact on the Departments' ability to employ former staff employed by an outside organisation under outsourcing arrangements if that organisation fails to renew its contract with the Department; [104247]

(3) what employment protection applies to former staff of Government Departments who are employed by outside organisations as a result of outsourcing arrangements when the organisation concerned fails to have its contract renewed with the Department; [104246]

(4) what guidance she issues to Government Departments concerning the terms and conditions of employment of staff who as a result of outsourcing are employed by sub-contractors of the organisation to which the relevant operation has been outsourced. [104248]

Mr. Stringer: I published, on Friday 7 January 2000, a "Statement of Practice for Staff Transfers in the Public Sector". This follows a public consultation undertaken last year which received widespread support.

The Statement of Practice sets out the Government's policy for ensuring fair and consistent treatment of employees' rights where the public sector is the employer or client in a contracting-out or subsequent retendering situation. The guidance does not require Departments to monitor the rate of retention following a transfer. The approach adopted in the "Statement of Practice", which has the support of unions, public and private sector employers and contractors, is to utilise the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)—TUPE—Regulations which give individual employment protection rights to employees affected by the relevant transfer.

Contracting-out and subsequent retendering will all be conducted on the basis that staff will transfer and TUPE should apply, unless there are genuinely exceptional reasons not to do so. Under TUPE, an employee's contract is carried across from the transferring employer along with his or her accrued period of service. Terms and conditions of employment cannot be made less beneficial as part of this process and employees cannot normally be lawfully dismissed where the reason is the transfer. Under this approach, staff of Government Departments should transfer to a contractor with TUPE protections and, where a contract is not renewed (by either the contractor or contracting authority), former staff of Government should transfer with TUPE protections to the new contractor. Similar considerations would also apply to sub-contracting.

Copies of "Statement of Practice for Staff Transfers in the Public Sector" are in the Libraries of the House.

HEALTH

Embryology

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans Her Majesty's Government have to propose legislation to prevent the setting up of commercial establishments purporting to select the sex of a baby by embryology. [99751]

Yvette Cooper: Any treatment involving the use of human embryos outside the body is governed by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. The Act provides that such treatment cannot take place without a licence issued by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA).

In January 1993 the HFEA issued a public consultation document on the issues raised by sex selection and the ways of achieving it using assisted conception techniques. Following the consultation, the HFEA decided that licensed infertility clinics could carry out sex selection for medical reasons only in cases where a woman risked having a child with a life-threatening, sex-linked disease. Sex selection for social reasons is not permitted.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of regional variations in the diagnosis and treatment of prostate cancer; and if he will make a statement. [99872]

Yvette Cooper: We are aware of regional variations in the diagnosis, treatment and survival of cancers, including prostate cancer. Data have been published in the report by the Office For National Statistics "Cancer Survival Trends" which provides evidence that cancer survival in adults in England and Wales is generally lower among patients in more deprived groups than those in more affluent groups. Equity of access was a founding principle of the National Health Service and is central to

Government policy. It is one of the main aims of the new health strategy set out in the White Paper "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation".

Professor Mike Richards, the National Cancer Director, will spearhead the drive to modernise all aspects of cancer care, including addressing regional variations in survival rates. His role will be to ensure people in this country have faster, fairer cancer care. He will work in partnership with doctors, nurses, general practitioners, other health professionals and the voluntary sector to improve prevention and modernise cancer services to help ensure equitable access to high-quality cancer care.

By December 2000 all urgent GP referrals of suspected prostate cancer should be seen by a consultant within two weeks of referral. Work is under way to develop national standards and performance indicators for rollout from April 2000, and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will be commissioning outcomes guidance on four further cancer sites over the next two years. Urological cancers (including prostate cancer) will be the first of these.

E.coli

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the reported outbreaks within the UK over the last year of E coli 0157 poisoning. [100203]

Yvette Cooper: Information on reported outbreaks of E.Coli 0157 within England and Wales have been collected by the Public Health Laboratory Service since 1992. The table gives details of all general outbreaks of E.Coli 0157 infection in England and Wales reported to the PHLS Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre and Laboratory of Enteric Pathogens in the period November 1998-October 1999 (inclusive). However, the PHLS can only provide data for England and Wales.

Information on data for Northern Ireland and Scotland should be sought from their respective administrations.

Year	*Month*	*Region*	*Place of outbreak*
1998	November	West Midlands	Hospital
1999	February	Northern and Yorkshire	Community (Dairy)
1999	March	Northern and Yorkshire	Community (Retailer)
1999	April	Trent	Farm
1999	May	North West	Community (Dairy)
1999	May	South East	Community (Butcher)
1999	May	Northern and Yorkshire	Hospital
1999	May	Wales	Farm
1999	July	Trent	Prison
1999	July	North West	Public House
1999	July	Wales	Camp Site
1999	August	South West	Beach
1999	August	Wales	Community (Butcher)
1999	September	South East	Restaurant
1999	September	North West	Nursing Home
1999	September	Northern and Yorkshire	Community
1999	October	London	Nursery

Note:
All data are provisional.

Borderline Products

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Government's assessment of the public response to the Medicines Control Agency's proposals for classifying borderline products, as published in its consultation letter MLX 249. [100254]

Yvette Cooper: As a result of the public response to the consultation proposals, we announced on 16 July that changes would be made. The three principal changes are as follows:

the draft regulations will include an express requirement for full disclosures of the reasons for the Medicines Control Agency's provisional and final determinations;

the review panel to look at the MCA's provisional determinations and advise the licensing authority—the licensing authority will be independent of the MCA;

if a final determination is challenged, the MCA will have to prove in any criminal proceedings that the product is a medicinal product.

NHS Expenditure (Barnet)

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the total expenditure on all national health services in the borough of Barnet in each of the last five years. [100215]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* The information is not available in the format requested. Information on expenditure on National Health Service services is not collected by borough.

Expenditure figures for Barnet Health Authority for 1996–97 to 1998–99 are available as follows. Before 1996–97 funding was allocated to Family Health Services Authorities and HA's separately. Comparable figures are not available. The figure for 1996–97 includes drugs expenditure. Since 1997–98 the majority of drugs expenditure has been accounted for by the Prescription Pricing Authority and cannot be identified by HA. For consistency, the figures have been adjusted to reflect this.

£000

Year	*HA total expenditure* [1, 2]	*HA expenditure (adjusted)* [3]
1996–97	210,456	193,573
1997–98	209,238	208,437
1998–99 (provisional)	209,462	208,671

[1] Figures are taken from HA annual accounts which are prepared on a resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year. Comparisons between years may be distorted by expenditure carried over from the previous year.
[2] These are not the total amounts spent on health care. General dental services expenditure is separately accounted for and cannot be analysed by HA over the three years.
[3] Figures have been reduced by the amount of non-cash limited prescribing expenditure accounted for by the HA in each year.

Oncology Drug Expenditure

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what progress has been made in assessing the report on the level of oncology drug expenditure in the United Kingdom by the Campaign for Effective and Rational Treatment, and if he will make a statement; [100596]

(2) if he will begin to collate data from health authorities on their spending on oncology drugs; and if he will make a statement. [100595]

Yvette Cooper: Professor Mike Richards, the National Cancer Director, will shortly begin to collate data on the provision of chemotherapy and will be discussing with the National Institute for Clinical Excellence the need to

make available, early, clear guidance on the effectiveness of new and emerging cancer drugs. Professor Richards has already started to meet key professional groups to discuss how they can best work with him to start to address the challenging cancer agenda and is planning to meet the Campaign for Effective and Rational Treatment early in the new year.

Malnutrition

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he next plans to meet the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition to discuss the public health aspects of malnutrition. [100632]

Yvette Cooper: I am aware of several letters from hon. Members enclosing invitations to meet the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition. I will reply to these shortly.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the level of malnutrition among hospital patients in the United Kingdom. [100630]

Yvette Cooper: The number of admissions to National Health Service hospitals in England with a diagnosis of malnutrition during the financial year 1997–98 was 6,293.

Source:

Hospital Episode Statistics.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost saving of early detection and treatment of malnutrition among hospital patients. [100631]

Yvette Cooper: In 1992 the King's Fund reported that nutritional support of malnourished patients could lead to reduced complication rates and reduced length of hospital stay. They estimated that this might lead to a saving of up to £266 million annually in Britain.

Birth Weights

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* babies born by in-vitro fertilisation and *(b)* other babies, in each of the last 20 years, weighed (i) over 3,000 g, (ii) over 2,500 g but less than 3,000 g, (iii) over 2,000 g but less than 2,500 g and (iv) less than 2,000 g. [100814]

Yvette Cooper: The information that is available has been placed in the Library.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the relative cost-effectiveness of treating cold-related illnesses through the eradication of fuel poverty via energy efficiency improvements. [100820]

Yvette Cooper: Through the introduction of the New Home Energy Efficiency Scheme and other initiatives, we are working to combat fuel poverty. Energy efficiency improvements are an effective means of tackling the many health problems related to cold conditions in homes. Our aim is to improve health, reduce health inequalities and ensure that vulnerable households need no longer risk ill health due to a cold home.

Cancer (Death Rates)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what mechanism he proposes to monitor the proposed target to reduce the death rate from cancer by 20 per cent. by 2010. [101422]

Yvette Cooper: The target is to reduce the death rate from all cancers among those aged under 75 years by at least 20 per cent. by the year 2010. Progress towards this target will be monitored annually using data from cancer death registrations collected and published by the Office for National Statistics.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arrangements *(a)* he and *(b)* Ministers in his Department have put in place for the taking and keeping of minutes of meetings between Ministers and people outside his Department. [102380]

Yvette Cooper: Decisions on the format of minutes of meetings will depend on the nature of the discussion.

Departmental Buildings

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for each of the buildings under his Department's control how many rooms are set aside for *(a)* ethnic minority religious use, *(b)* pregnant and nursing mothers and *(c)* smokers. [102332]

Yvette Cooper: In the eleven buildings where the Department is the major Government occupier, there are no rooms set aside specifically for ethnic minority religious use. A total of three rooms are available exclusively for pregnant and nursing mothers, and 27 rooms for smokers.

Royal Marsden and Christie Hospitals

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health *(a)* how many patients were treated, *(b)* what was the number of (i) beds and (ii) consultant surgeons and *(c)* what was the revenue budget for the financial year 1998–99 for (A) the Royal Marsden Hospital in London and (B) the Christie Hospital in Manchester. [102514]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The figures for the number of patients treated and the number of beds for 1998–99 are not yet available. However in view of the unique factors affecting the Royal Marsden Hospital, such as the major complex surgery undertaken, the different case mix and the higher building and capital costs, a simplistic comparison of the data for both hospitals would not produce any meaningful results.

As at 30 September 1998, the Christie Hospital and the Royal Marsden Hospitals had 2 and 7 consultants respectively, whose first speciality was recorded in the Surgical Group. However, there are a number of consultants based in hospitals across Manchester and Salford who have operating rights at the Christie Hospital but who will not be included in the centrally collected statistics.

The 1998–99 revenue income for the Christie Hospital is £57,347,000, and for the Royal Marsden Hospital it is £74,873,000.

Cancer Treatment

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many additional *(a)* oncologists and *(b)* other consultants specialising in the care of cancer will be recruited under his plans for treating cancer. [102768]

Yvette Cooper: Professor Mike Richards, the National Cancer Director, has identified the need to review the cancer workforce as his top priority. He is currently discussing workforce, skill mix, and recruitment and retention issues with professional groups to enable patients to receive faster and fairer access to cancer services.

Needle Exchange Services

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many Government-funded needle exchange services are available for drug addicts *(a)* in the North-West region and *(b)* in England and Wales. [102699]

Yvette Cooper: This information is not available centrally for England or the North-West region.

Information from local sources is that there are about 45 Government-funded needle exchange schemes based in agencies in the North-West region. In addition, there are pharmacy schemes and mobile outreach teams (which may be Government-funded needle exchange services); no reliable information on these is available.

Information for Wales is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the First Secretary for Wales.

Food Safety

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that local authorities do not reduce levels of service under the Food Safety Act 1990 prior to the commencement of the Food Standards Agency's operation. [103297]

Yvette Cooper: Decisions on the provision of food law enforcement services are for local authorities in the light of local circumstances. Officials are involved in discussions with the local authorities' co-ordinating body on food and trading standards about the arrangements which will operate for the planning, monitoring and audit of local authority enforcement when the Food Standards Agency is established next year.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the expenditure per head of population for shire county local authorities on their public health functions under the Food Safety Act 1990 for the latest year for which figures are available. [103296]

Yvette Cooper: County councils do not provide public health services under the Food Safety Act 1990. Certain food law enforcement functions are the responsibility of County councils but information on such expenditure is not separately identifiable in the returns received centrally.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance he gives to public analysts for setting sampling rates for samples taken for analysis under the Food Safety Act 1990. [103298]

Yvette Cooper: There is no central guidance on a specific level of sampling to public analysts or local authorities. Decisions on the provision of food law enforcement services are for local authorities in the light of local circumstances.

Gamma Hydroxy Butyrate

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to raise awareness of the dangers of gamma hydroxy butyrate. [103377]

Yvette Cooper: Information on the dangers of gamma hydroxy butyrate is included in the leaflets "The Score" (targeted at 14–16 year olds) and "D-MAG" (targeted at 16 and upwards) produced by the Health Education Authority as part of a campaign on behalf of the Department which aims to educate 11–25 year olds and parents about the dangers of drug misuse.

In order to further raise awareness regarding the dangers and physical effects of gamma hydroxy butyrate, the Medicines Control Agency has issued briefings to Heads of Police Force Intelligence Bureaux, Trading Standard Officers and Environmental Health Officers. This action was supplemented by a series of presentations by the MCA, in conjunction with the National Criminal Intelligence Service, to the 43 regional police forces throughout the country.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103849]

Yvette Cooper: The Department's running cost allocations for financial years covered by the comprehensive spending review (1999–2000 to 2001–02) assumed that pressures arising from price inflation would be absorbed by efficiency and productivity gains of 3.5 per cent. a year. These gains are being delivered through the Department's better quality services programme, use of its organisational development function and through a range of internal and external reviews and inspections (including peer reviews of internal resource allocation).

"Fit for the Future?"

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the cost implications for residential homes for the elderly of the proposals contained in the consultation document, "Fit for the Future?" ; and if he will make a statement. [103471]

Mr. Hutton: The Department commissioned Laing and Buisson to work on a cost-benefit analysis of the standards to ascertain the likely burden on providers. Additional information was gathered from heads of inspection regarding the current standard of provision. Information from these studies was published in the consultation document "Fit for the Future?", together with a draft regulatory impact appraisal.

Overhead Powerlines

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to test the validity of the scientific research underlying recent studies into the link between overhead powerlines and skin cancer. [103600]

Yvette Cooper: In research published recently in the International Journal of Radiation Biology, scientists from Bristol University reported observations of increased deposition of natural radionuclides near power lines. The authors suggest that this might lead to an increased risk of skin cancer for people living under high voltage powerlines. This research was financed in part by the Department.

The Department will consider the results of this study in the context of other work in this area and has asked for views from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). The NRPB's Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation is reviewing the research in this area and will report in the New Year.

Care Homes

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many private nursing homes and residential homes there were in the United Kingdom in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999. [103836]

Mr. Hutton: The numbers of independent residential and nursing care homes in England at 31 March 1997 and 1998 are 26,600 and 26,700 respectively. Data for 1999 are not yet available. Information for the remainder of the United Kingdom is a matter for the relevant devolved authorities.

Negative Pressure Therapy

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent guidelines he has issued to health authorities on the use of negative pressure therapy. [R] [103096]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has not issued any specific guidance on the use of negative pressure therapy.

The most appropriate method of wound care should be determined by a clinician.

BCG Vaccine

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if resources allocated to the BCG vaccination programme have been transferred *(a)* in the short term and *(b)* permanently to the vaccination programme for meningitis. [103396]

Yvette Cooper: Funding for the meningococcal Group C immunisation programme has come from a separate source to that used to fund the BCG immunisation programme. We are aware that some health workers, especially school nurses, involved in delivering BCG vaccine, are currently involved in the meningococcal Group C immunisation programme in schools. Up to £9 million of new money is being made available to health authorities to support the meningococcal Group C immunisation programme, in addition to the central purchase and supply of vaccine at no cost to health authorities.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the level of stocks of BCG vaccine in the NHS. [103392]

Yvette Cooper: BCG vaccine has been in limited supply for a number of months due to severe manufacturing problems encountered by the sole United Kingdom licensed source, Medeva Pharma Ltd. Stocks are now being delivered. Until manufacture resumes to viable quantities, stocks are being used specifically for those at highest risk.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to give priority to Brentwood when stocks of BCG vaccine become available. [103399]

Yvette Cooper: While BCG vaccine is in limited supply from the manufacturer, Medeva Pharma Ltd., stocks are being used for those at highest risk. Priority of supply is made on the basis of clinical need, not geographical location. Brentwood will be treated equally with other areas according to the risk.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which health authorities do not provide BCG vaccinations as a routine procedure. [103646]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* BCG immunisation against tuberculosis at age 10–14 is nationally recommended as routine. We are aware that a small number of health authorities have not been providing routine BCG immunisation for all 10 to 14-year-olds. We do not keep records of which health authorities do not routinely immunise 10 to 14-year-olds.

Health Services (Age Discrimination)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he has in place to combat age discrimination in the provision of health services. [103244]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Discrimination of any kind—whether it is on the basis of age, race or gender—is completely unacceptable in the National Health Service. Treatment should rest entirely on clinical need. We are determined to provide older people with care that meets their needs—fast, efficient and sensitive. Already we have extended the annual immunisation programme for influenza to ensure that everyone aged 75 and over can have the flu vaccine free of charge. Over the next three years we will be expanding cataract services to increase the number of cataract operations from 170,000 a year currently to 250,000 a year—this will benefit thousands of older people. From 1 April this year all people aged 60 and over are entitled to free eye tests, regardless of income or health status. We are also developing a National Service Framework (NSF) for Older People. This, for the first time, will set national standards for the care of older people, driving up the quality and reducing variations in that care. The NSF will be published next year.

Cancer Patients (Fertility Treatment)

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the decision to deny women cancer patients access to their stored eggs. [103653]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority is responsible under the terms of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 among other things for licensing decisions for the storage of human eggs. The Act provides for appeals to be made to the Authority in certain circumstances where an applicant is not satisfied with a licensing decision. I understand that an appeal will be heard by the Authority later this month.

Musculoskeletal Conditions

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve services to people suffering from arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions. [102840]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the comments I made during the adjournment debate on arthritis on 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 126–30.

High-security Hospitals (Staffing)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes there have been in the figures for vacancies in high-security hospitals for *(a)* nurses, *(b)* nursing assistants, *(c)* occupational therapists, *(d)* forensic psychologists and *(e)* psychiatrists since his answer of 26 May 1999, *Official Report*, columns 159–60W. [104345]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally. The high-security hospitals are well advanced on a programme of full integration with the rest of the National Health Service. The integration process is now being taken forward at a local level and workforces issues are a matter for local consideration.

Generic Drugs

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the change in the cost of generic drugs in the last year and its effect on the NHS. [104010]

Ms Stuart: During 1999 the Drug Tariff price of the top two hundred generic drugs dispensed in the community rose by over a third on average. On 21 December we announced additional in-year funding of £90 million to help the National Health Service manage the pressures from generic prices on health authority budgets.

The Government have put in place a fundamental review of the way generics are supplied to the NHS to see whether existing arrangements best serve the service and to identify possible alternatives. The conclusions of the programme of work are expected by the summer.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education Funding Council

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the future chairmanship of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. [104621]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend has appointed the current chairman, Sir Michael Checkland, to serve for a further year until 30 September 2001. We are very grateful to Sir Michael for his contribution to the work of the council over the last three years and for his willingness to continue to serve as chairman.

Education Action Zones

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will report on the progress of the first round of education action zones. [104451]

Ms Estelle Morris: These zones have now been running for 12 to 16 months and the early signs are that they are doing well. The summer 1999 exam results show that the zones are raising standards in these disadvantaged areas. At Key Stage 2, there was a 6 per cent. average improvement in English and 12 per cent. improvement in maths in EAZ schools compared to national increases of 5 per cent. and 10 per cent. There was a 2 per cent. average improvement in the numbers of pupils gaining 1 GCSE A*-G grade in EAZ schools compared to a national increase of 1 per cent.

The Comptroller and Auditor General yesterday placed in both Libraries of Parliament audited financial accounts for the 1998–99 financial year for four of the first round zones. These show that, even in their first seven months of operation, the zones attracted significant additional funding to education from the private and public sectors.

Ufi Ltd.

Mr. Bill Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out the framework, including controls, within which the Department will provide financial support to Ufi Ltd. [104449]

Mr. Wicks: Ufi Ltd. is a private company limited by guarantee established by the Secretary of State in October 1998. The company is seeking charitable status. By making use of information and communications technologies it will encourage innovative and cost-effective ways to learn.

The Department exercises a number of controls over Ufi Ltd. The company's Memorandum and Articles of Association were approved by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State also has the right to appoint the Chairman and between 30 and 49 per cent. of the Board Directors/members of the company, and to approve the appointment of the Chief Executive.

The Funding Agreement between the Secretary of State and Ufi Ltd. provides for a number of checks and controls on the spending of public funds. It specifies that a Financial Plan, which sets out the company's financial proposals and reflects the guidance the Secretary of State may give Ufi Ltd., shall be submitted to the Secretary of State annually. The Financial Plan must take into account guidance issued by the Secretary of State annually. The Financial Plan must be approved by the Secretary of State and it is subsequently monitored by the Department. The Financial Plan relates Ufi Ltd.'s costs to its activities in the year covered by the plan. The Funding Agreement and the Financial Plan provide the basis for financial support.

In recognition of the market in which Ufi Ltd. will operate, the company will own the assets it creates (mainly intellectual property rights on learning products) and retain any receipts from the disposal of assets. The Department will take account of any income received by the company as a result of Government investment, including asset disposal proceeds, in fixing the level of future financial support. This regime will apply only so long as the company receives Government support; any such income received by the company after it has achieved financial independence will be treated as its own.

The Funding Agreement also provides for UfI Ltd.'s intellectual property rights to be assigned to the Secretary of State if the Funding Agreement is terminated due to UfI Ltd.'s breach of contract or insolvency. The Memorandum of the company provides that if the company is wound up or dissolved the Secretary of State has a right of veto over the disposition of any remaining assets.

Higher Education Students

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the additional annual cost of support for students attending higher education institutions in England if the support arrangements applicable in 1979, including grants uprated by inflation, were to be applied to the number of students in the 1998–99 academic year. [101950]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 13 December 1999]:* The student support system for English and Welsh students has changed significantly over the past 20 years and the levels of grant received by higher education students in 1979 are not known precisely. However, assuming that approximately 800,000 eligible English and Welsh students in 1998–99 received the main rates of maintenance grant for the academic year 1978–79 uplifted for inflation over 20 years, we estimate that they would receive slightly less on average in real terms than from the current loans and grant fee package.

If these 800,000 eligible students had been offered a grant for maintenance and free tuition instead of the current package of a repayable loan for maintenance and private contributions towards the cost of tuition, the additional costs to the Department might have been about £660 million; and we estimate that such a system would cost about £1.6 billion more than full implementation of the new arrangements for fees and income-contingent loans applying for students starting in the current (1999–2000) academic year.

Our student support policies share the costs of higher education more equitably between students who benefit from it and the taxpayer. That has enabled us to halt the decline in investment in higher education and helped provide for a 22 per cent. increase in cash funding by 2001–02.

LEA Administrative Costs

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 416W, on local education authority administration costs, if he will list, for each local education authority, the percentage of its education budget spent on administration, ranked in decreasing order. [102859]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table gives, for each local education authority in England, information on administration expenditure, encompassing central management and administration and service, strategy and regulation costs, in decreasing percentage order for the financial year 1997–98.

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA number/name	*Expenditure on central management administration and service strategy and regulation costs (£000)*	*Total education expenditure (£000)*	*Administration as percentage of total education expenditure*
201 London, City of	640	3,045	21.02
856 Leicester City	16,577	144,189	11.50
813 North Lincolnshire	5,227	68,560	7.62
204 Hackney	8,037	109,663	7.33
320 Waltham Forest	7,579	104,170	7.28
826 Milton Keynes	5,128	71,491	7.17
202 Camden	6,018	85,137	7.07
203 Greenwich	8,318	119,500	6.96
355 Salford	6,808	100,302	6.79
213 Westminster, City of	5,143	79,172	6.50
319 Sutton	3,825	59,135	6.47
211 Tower Hamlets	8,867	138,041	6.42
305 Bromley	4,638	72,825	6.37
921 Isle of Wight	3,233	53,117	6.09
312 Hillingdon	3,878	64,706	5.99
307 Ealing	6,576	111,613	5.89
308 Enfield	6,959	121,535	5.73
922 Kent	27,805	490,388	5.67
303 Bexley	4,780	84,328	5.67
210 Southwark	6,505	115,502	5.63
825 Buckinghamshire	10,175	183,122	5.56
205 Hammersmith and Fulham	3,631	66,525	5.46
315 Merton	3,745	68,753	5.45
206 Islington	5,222	96,680	5.40
803 South Gloucestershire	5,222	97,604	5.35
837 Bournemouth	2,252	42,824	5.26
390 Gateshead	4,343	85,753	5.06
801 Bristol, City of	7,427	150,630	4.93
340 Knowsley	3,518	72,887	4.83
846 Brighton and Hove	4,044	84,308	4.80
836 Poole	1,736	36,198	4.80
393 South Tyneside	3,208	66,931	4.79

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA number/name	*Expenditure on central management administration and service strategy and regulation costs (£000)*	*Total education expenditure (£000)*	*Administration as percentage of total education expenditure*
805 Hartlepool	1,899	39,627	4.79
207 Kensington and Chelsea	2,409	50,930	4.73
865 Wiltshire	5,915	125,183	4.73
212 Wandsworth	3,823	81,418	4.70
802 North Somerset	3,502	74,918	4.67
301 Barking and Dagenham	3,782	82,155	4.60
381 Calderdale	2,882	63,093	4.57
806 Middlesbrough	2,890	64,150	4.51
857 Rutland	374	8,377	4.46
845 East Sussex	7,767	174,200	4.46
209 Lewisham	5,355	123,671	4.33
841 Darlington	1,656	38,586	4.29
916 Gloucestershire	6,431	151,161	4.25
391 Newcastle upon Tyne	5,210	124,861	4.17
925 Lincolnshire	7,965	192,649	4.13
314 Kingston upon Thames	1,887	45,821	4.12
800 Bath and North East Somerset	2,685	65,303	4.11
384 Wakefield	4,961	123,743	4.01
382 Kirklees	6,401	160,668	3.98
930 Nottinghamshire	16,335	410,159	3.98
341 Liverpool	8,431	214,669	3.93
937 Warwickshire	6,914	176,695	3.91
313 Hounslow	3,902	100,550	3.88
929 Northumberland	4,918	127,147	3.87
344 Wirral	5,324	137,692	3.87
310 Harrow	3,444	90,658	3.80
931 Oxfordshire	8,468	224,742	3.77
318 Richmond upon Thames	2,302	61,268	3.76
936 Surrey	11,662	311,806	3.74
812 North East Lincolnshire	2,573	69,514	3.70
861 Stoke on Trent	3,484	95,220	3.66
420 Isles of Scilly	48	1,315	3.65
840 Durham	7,556	207,933	3.63
354 Rochdale	3,124	86,880	3.60
933 Somerset	6,492	182,668	3.55
352 Manchester	7,160	201,489	3.55
905 Cambridgeshire	8,392	236,410	3.55
373 Sheffield	6,408	185,078	3.46
357 Tameside	2,935	86,124	3.41
302 Barnet	4,021	118,117	3.40
855 Leicestershire	7,991	234,971	3.40
334 Solihull	2,960	87,664	3.38
372 Rotherham	3,626	108,887	3.33
923 Lancashire	19,887	600,316	3.31
808 Stockton on Tees	2,562	77,953	3.29
820 Bedfordshire	4,738	145,643	3.25
811 East Riding of Yorkshire	4,057	125,270	3.24
304 Brent	2,883	89,318	3.23
359 Wigan	4,094	127,446	3.21
356 Stockport	3,434	106,917	3.21
850 Hampshire	13,474	422,229	3.19
342 St. Helens	2,519	78,961	3.19
938 West Sussex	8,767	275,954	3.18
810 Kingston upon Hull, City of	3,464	109,040	3.18
831 Derby City	2,428	76,492	3.17
333 Sandwell	4,199	132,886	3.16
383 Leeds	9,419	298,406	3.16
311 Havering	2,623	83,266	3.15
821 Luton	2,436	77,349	3.15
903 Berkshire	8,404	267,657	3.14
316 Newham	4,267	135,924	3.14
336 Wolverhampton	3,464	112,340	3.08
919 Hertfordshire	11,744	381,000	3.08
306 Croydon	3,604	117,322	3.07
815 North Yorkshire	6,894	226,612	3.04
851 Portsmouth	1,952	64,417	3.03
380 Bradford	6,516	215,243	3.03
370 Barnsley	2,555	84,761	3.01
351 Bury	2,173	72,152	3.01
350 Bolton	3,284	110,539	2.97

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA number/name	*Expenditure on central management administration and service strategy and regulation costs (£000)*	*Total education expenditure (£000)*	*Administration as percentage of total education expenditure*
309 Haringey	3,431	115,506	2.97
807 Redcar and Cleveland	1,907	65,203	2.92
332 Dudley	3,070	109,300	2.81
343 Sefton	3,611	129,018	2.80
330 Birmingham	13,139	474,930	2.77
928 Northamptonshire	5,848	219,386	2.67
866 Swindon	1,485	56,529	2.63
371 Doncaster	3,477	132,740	2.62
358 Trafford	1,906	73,978	2.58
908 Cornwall	4,839	191,084	2.53
911 Devon	9,049	379,671	2.38
317 Redbridge	2,566	111,188	2.31
835 Dorset	3,066	132,855	2.31
932 Shropshire	3,549	159,324	2.23
353 Oldham	2,343	106,845	2.19
906 Cheshire	8,888	409,158	2.17
335 Walsall	2,258	106,613	2.12
816 York, City of	1,359	64,254	2.12
935 Suffolk	5,309	255,730	2.08
909 Cumbria	3,581	172,573	2.08
926 Norfolk	5,349	261,104	2.05
830 Derbyshire	4,688	246,721	1.90
918 Hereford and Worcester	4,791	255,477	1.88
394 Sunderland	2,218	121,571	1.82
331 Coventry	2,518	148,766	1.69
392 North Tyneside	1,217	79,219	1.54
915 Essex	5,872	423,907	1.39
852 Southampton	1,058	80,828	1.31
208 Lambeth	768	101,093	0.76
860 Staffordshire	2,243	301,949	0.74
Total	678,572	18,898,737	3.59

Further Education Colleges

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had since May 1997 relating to the 16-hour rule and further education colleges; and if he will make a statement. [103647]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* We have received a number of representations from individuals and organisations regarding further education colleges and the 16-hour study role in Jobseeker's Allowance. These were mainly in response to the White Paper "Learning to Succeed" published in July 1999, where we introduced proposals for a new system of post-16 learning which is responsive to the needs of individuals, companies and communities. The White Paper, and the Learning and Skills Council Prospectus which was published in December, set out our plans for the new Learning and Skills Council which will ensure a co-ordinated and coherent approach to post-16 learning.

We have taken positive measures to increase the opportunities for study among unemployed people. The New Deal for Young People aged 18 to 24 forms a key part of the Government's Welfare to Work agenda and comprises four options, all of which contain an element of training. The Full-Time Education and Training Option offers opportunities for young people to study full-time in order to enhance their prospects of finding a job. In June 1998 we introduced Education and Training Opportunities under the New Deal for those aged 25 and over. These allow people unemployed for two years or more to undertake full-time employment-related courses for up to a year whilst continuing to receive Jobseeker's Allowance.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Pesticides

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the applications received by the Pesticides Safety Directorate for the use of (i) glufosinate ammonium and (ii) glyphosate on genetically modified herbicide resistant crops, for each application giving *(a)* the name of the applicant, *(b)* the crop for which approval is sought, *(c)* the date the application was received and *(d)* the date at which the decision by the Pesticides Safety Directorate will be announced. [101749]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* At present, for reasons of commercial confidentiality, details of any application for the approval of a pesticide are not made publicly available unless and until approval itself is given. We are, however, to review the current arrangements to see if there is scope for greater openness and transparency.

Religious Slaughter

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research his Department has

(a) commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the enforcement of the law with regard to *(a)* Halal and *(b)* Shechita religious slaughter; and if he will make a statement. [102257]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 December 1999]:* No research into the enforcement of the law with regard to religious slaughter has been commissioned or evaluated by my Department.

Enforcement of welfare at slaughter legislation, including in relation to religious slaughter, is the responsibility of the Meat Hygiene Service and the State Veterinary Service.

Beef Sales

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of the meat and meat offal products of bovine animals that were banned under the beef bones Regulations SI 1997/2959 will be eligible for sale under the draft regulations he intends to use to lift the ban on beef on the bone. [102059]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The Beef Bones (Amendment) (England) Regulations 1999, which came into force on 17 December, permit the retail sale of all bone-in beef and beef bones for human consumption. In accordance with the advice of the Chief Medical Officers that it would not be prudent to lift the controls of manufacturing uses of bone-in beef and beef bones, these continue to apply. No information is available on the relative percentages these represent of the products banned under the original Regulations, but my primary concern is the protection of public health, based on the scientific and medical advice I receive. This significant relaxation of the beef bones controls has been warmly welcomed.

Fish Stocks

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to what extent primary quota stocks have been affected by *(a)* environmental change, *(b)* sea water temperature change, *(c)* fishing effort and *(d)* seals and other predators, in the last three years. [103667]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* It is not possible to distinguish the exact changes attributable to environmental change and those due to sea water temperature change alone. Any temperature-related changes will in any case not be the same for all species. Cod stocks, for example, are likely to benefit from colder conditions while sole stocks may suffer severe losses from cold sea water temperatures as happened in the winters of 1962–63 and 1995–96.

The general increase in fishing effort over the past decades is primarily responsible for the low level of commercial stocks. However, the recent poor production of young cod stocks is likely to be attributable to a combination of low adult stock size and unusually warm sea temperatures.

The effects of seals and other predators on fish stocks have been the subject of multispecies research in the North Sea. Here, over four million tonnes of fish are eaten annually by other fish. In comparison, fish consumption by seals is estimated at less than 200,000 tonnes of which a significant amount is young fish and sandeels.

Farmers (Regulatory Burden)

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent representations he has received from farmers concerning the level and cost of regulations affecting farming in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* other EU member states. [103398]

Ms Quin: In September 1999 we invited the NFU and other interested organisations to identify burdens that affected business. We now have reports from the three working groups we set up to look at the three priority areas and will be studying these carefully to see where we can change requirements in the UK and where we need to press for changes in Brussels. Reports on other more specific areas identified for review will become available for similar consideration over the next few weeks.

Over-30-Months Scheme

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has for changes to the Over-Thirty-Months Scheme. [103353]

Ms Quin: In due course (following advice from the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee) it may be appropriate to discuss the Over-Thirty-Months Scheme with European partners on the over-thirty-month rule. In the meantime the Government's planning assumption is that the Scheme will continue for the foreseeable future.

Livestock Slaughter Regulations

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to remove restrictions in livestock slaughter regulations; and what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of introducing an intermediate stamp to allow abattoirs to slaughter 40 units a day. [103389]

Ms Quin: These issues were addressed in the report of the Meat Industry Red Tape Working Group which was published on 13 December 1999. A copy is available in the Library of the House and on the MAFF internet site. The Government are now considering the Working Group's recommendations and will give its response in the new year.

Meat Hygiene Service

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to increase the use of information technology within the Meat Hygiene Service. [103395]

Ms Quin: The Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) uses a large number of information technology (IT) systems as part of its everyday operations and has an ongoing IT strategy to develop and use additional systems as a means of improving efficiency.

To this end, the MHS is currently developing a number of initiatives, one of which relates to the use of scanning technology. For example, all Hygiene Assessment System (HAS) scores contained in the HAS Supplement of the November 1999 edition of the Meat Hygiene Enforcement Report were collated for the first time by the MHS using scanning technology. The MHS now intends to extend its use of this technology to other areas.

Abattoirs and Meat Processing Plants

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in what proportion of the time official veterinary surgeons spend in abattoirs and meat processing plants they are not engaged in inspection duties. [103400]

Ms Quin: Only a very small proportion (estimated at around 1 per cent.) of the time spent by Official Veterinary Surgeons (OVSs) in abattoirs and meat processing plants is not engaged on inspection duties.

The remainder and vast majority of the time charged by OVSs in abattoirs and meat processing plants is spent on carrying out statutory inspection duties or on activities which directly support them. These duties include: ante mortem and post mortem inspection and hygiene supervision; the supervision of SRM controls; the supervision of animal welfare; and associated administrative activities. The Meat Hygiene Service does not analyse time in plants below that directly chargeable to operators.

Farm Subsidies (Wiltshire)

Mr. Key: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the total value of approved payments to Wiltshire farmers for *(a)* the 1998 calendar year and *(b)* the 1989–99 financial year; and if he will list by value to Wiltshire farmers CAP schemes supporting market prices but which do not involve payments made directly to them. [102899]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The total value of approved payments to Wiltshire farmers for the 1998 calendar year and the 1998–99 financial year is as follows:

£000

	1998 Calendar	*1998–99 Financial*
Arable Area Payments Scheme	32,116	32,700
Environmentally Sensitive Area	309	376
Sheep Annual Premium Scheme	1,400	1,348
Suckler Cow Premium Scheme	2,254	2,288
Farm Woodland Premium Scheme	180	181
Farm Woodland Scheme	75	75
Organic Aid Scheme	116	140
Nitrate Sensitive Area	42	42
Countryside Stewardship Scheme	612	576
Habitat	156	156
Countryside Access Scheme	2	2
Beef Special Premium Scheme	3,572	3,661
	40,834	41,545

CAP schemes supporting market prices which benefit UK farmers but do not involve payments made directly to them are as follows. It is not possible to record the impact of these support measures on a county basis.

	Price
(1) The rates for the purchase of intervention commodities for the 1999 marketing year are:	
Beef	euro 3,475 per tonne (this is the intervention price but the maximum buying in price is determined by reference to market prices and tenders submitted)
Cereals	euro 119.5 per tonne (rising by monthly increments between November and May to a maximum of euro 126.9 per tonne)
Dairy:	
Butter	euro 2,953.8 per tonne (maximum buying in price—amount paid dependent on tender)
Skimmed Milk Powder	euro 2,055.2 per tonne
(2) The rates for Private Storage Aid are:	
Pigmeat	euro 463 per tonne (maximum)
Sheepmeat	euro 1,400 per tonne
(3) In addition farmers also benefit indirectly from the following trader-based schemes designed to support the agriculture market	
Liquid Skimmed Milk for Stockfeed	euro 58 per tonne
Skimmed Milk Powder for Animal Feed	euro 715.1 per tonne
School Milk Subsidy:	
(wholemilk)	euro 29.44 per 100kg
(Skimmed Milk)	euro 18.58 per 100 kg
Casein Production Subsidy	euro 6.42 per 100kg of Skimmed Milk
NPO Butter	euro 105 per 100kg
Butter for Manufacture	rate of aid varies depending on fat content of butter
Aid rate for 80% fat butter between	euro 880–920 per tonne
82% fat butter	euro 910–950 per tonne
Cream	euro 380–400 per tonne
Flax	euro 815.86 per HA
Hemp	euro 662.88 per HA
Dehydrated Fodder	euro 68.83 per tonne
Fruit and Vegetable Withdrawals:	
Cauliflowers	euro 8.38 per 100kg
Apples	euro 9.94 per 100kg
Pears	euro 9.46 per 100kg

	Price
Fruit and Vegetable Operational Programme	
Assistance is payable at 50 per cent. of actual approved expenditure, subject to an annual ceiling set between 2.5–4.5 per cent. of the producer organisation's marketed production	
Starch	euro 52.66 per tonne
Grape Must:	
British Wine	euro 0.2379 per kg
Home Wine Kits	euro 0.3103 per kg
Hops	euro 480/hectare
Seeds	
Cereals	Range euro 14.37–17.27 per Quintal
Oilseeds	Range euro 20.53–28.38 per Quintal
Grasses	Range euro 19.20–83.56 per Quintal
Leguminous Plants	Range euro 75.11 per Quintal
Sugar in Chemical	
Industry	euro 459.16 per tonne
Sugar Storage Costs	euro 3.30 per tonne
Cane Refining Scheme	euro 29.20 per tonne

Note:
All rates are paid in £ sterling using the Euro Conversion Rate (ECR) in force on the operative date

Food Labelling

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the rules which *(a)* require and *(b)* allow food manufacturing companies to display the country of origin on their packaging for food sold in supermarkets; and if he will make a statement. [102190]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 December 1999]: (a)* The Food Labelling Regulations 1996 SI No. 1996 1499 (as amended) require origin marking where failure to provide such information might mislead the purchaser to a material degree as to the food's true origin.

The following measures contain product specific rules on origin marking:

The Common Agricultural Policy (Wine) Regulations 1996 SI No. 696 (as amended).

The Food Safety (Fishery Products and Live Shellfish) (Hygiene) Regulations 1998 SI No. 994.

The Agricultural and Horticultural Act 1964 (as amended).

The Natural Mineral Water, Spring Water and Bottled Water Regulations 1999 SI No. 1540.

The Eggs (Marketing Standards) (Amendment) Regulations 1991 SI No. 1396.

Council Regulation (EEC) No. 1906/90 laying down the rules on poultry meat.

Council Regulation (EEC) No. 1374/98 which relates to imports under GATT.

(b) Voluntary origin labelling must comply with rules controlling false and misleading descriptions (the Food Safety Act 1990 and the Trade Descriptions Act 1968). In the case of beef there are detailed rules in the Beef Labelling (Enforcement) Regulations 1998.

Chlormequat

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the application of public health regulations to imports of chlormequat-sprayed pears into the UK. [103294]

Ms Quin: The Pesticides (Maximum Residue Levels in Crops, Food and Feeding Stuffs) (Amendment) Regulations 1997 set a maximum residue level (MRL) from chlormequat in pears of 3.0 Mg/Kg. The MRL originates from an EC Directive. The general provisions of the Food Safety Act 1990 also apply.

Earlier from this year, the Government's routine monitoring programme for pesticide residues in food showed that some imported pears contained residues of chlormequat substantially above MRL. We immediately contacted the authorities in the importing countries and received assurances that they had put measures in place to ensure that future exports complied with MRL. This included a ban on the use of chlormequat in pears grown in Belgium and severe restrictions on its use in the Netherlands. We are continuing to monitor the situation and will not hesitate to take further action if necessary.

Live Cattle Exports

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many live cattle were exported to European Union member states in 1999. [104255]

Ms Quin: None. The export of live cattle from the UK is prohibited by European Union legislation.

Animal Health Care Costs

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the annual expenditure on veterinary and other health care for animals *(a)* by pet owners, *(b)* by farmers and *(c)* in total. [104252]

Ms Quin: The cost of veterinary medicines and other health care for animals is not controlled by European or UK law and we have made no estimate of annual expenditure in these areas. However, the National Office of Animal Health Ltd. which represents manufacturers of veterinary medicines has estimated that the UK market for animal health products is approximately £370 million in terms of sales by manufacturers and that approximately half the sales by value are of products for the treatment of farm animals. Decisions on pricing of medicinal products are matters for the companies marketing them, taking account of commercial factors such as development and production costs and anticipated volume sales. Similarly, the cost of veterinary treatment is not governed by any statutory rules but is a matter for negotiation between veterinary surgeon and client.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 12 January 2000

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Athletics

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment has been made of the suitability of the proposed ramped area for the use of athletes coming from the external road to the Olympic Track of the English National Stadium Project; and if he will make a statement. [104311]

Kate Hoey: Following his statement to the House on 1 December 1999, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made a further announcement about the future of Wembley on 22 December 1999 which confirmed that, subject to further discussions between Wembley National Stadium Ltd., the Football Association and Sport England, athletics will be removed from the new national stadium at Wembley and an alternative venue sought elsewhere in London. Copies of that announcement have been placed in the Library of the House.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Water Industry

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the amount of capital expenditure by the water industry for improving the environment over the past five years; and what his estimate is of the anticipated expenditure on such schemes, by the industry, over the next five years. [103101]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The Director General of Water Services has published the capital expenditure of the water industry on quality enhancement for the five years from 1 April 1994 to 31 March 1999 in "1998–1999 Report on financial performance and expenditure of the water companies in England and Wales". Gross capital investment by the water industry on quality enhancement in this period was £6,691 million (in May 1999 prices).

On 25 November 1999 the Director published "Final determinations: Future water and sewerage charges 2000–2005". This document sets out the provisions within price limits for expenditure to improve the environment in the five years beginning 1 April 2000. This includes provision for capital enhancement expenditure and capital maintenance expenditure of £8.5 billion to improve drinking water quality and reach higher environmental standards. £7.45 billion of this is capital enhancement expenditure. £1.03 billion is capital maintenance expenditure which will allow the companies to meet water quality and environmental obligations. The Director is writing to the hon. Member with fuller information on the figures he requests.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the leakage rates for each water company in England; and what steps are being taken to reduce these levels. [104291]

Mr. Meacher: The Director General of Water Services published the leakage rates for the water undertakers in England in 1998–99 in the "1998–99 Report on leakage and water efficiency" in December. These rates, in megalitres per day and as a percentage of distribution input, were as follows:

	Megalitres per day	*Percentage*
Anglian	201	18.1
Bournemouth and West Hampshire	25.7	16.7
Bristol	56.4	18.7
Cambridge	13.1	18.5
Essex and Suffolk	76.4	15.9
Folkestone and Dover	8.7	17.8
Hartlepool	4.7	13.9
Mid Kent	30.1	19.0
North Surrey	22.3	17.3
North West	510	25.8
Northumbrian	171	22.0
Portsmouth	30.5	17.6
Severn Trent	344	18.4
South East	[1]98.9	[1]23.7
South Staffordshire	77.1	22.3
South West	92	21.1
Southern	95	16.1
Sutton and East Surrey	24.9	16.4
Tendring Hundred	5.5	18.5
Thames	770	31.1
Three Valleys	135.0	19.8
Wessex	100	25.9
York	9.0	19.5
Yorkshire	333	26.9

[1] Following inquiries by Ofwat, South East Water was asked to resubmit its water balance for 1997–98 and 1998–99. However, the company failed to supply a robust data set in time for inclusion in the report. The figure given here is for 1996–97 and is taken from the 1996–97 report on leakage and water efficiency.

The Director General of Water Services sets annual mandatory leakage targets for each water undertaker. The latest targets for 2000–01 were also published in the report. These targets represent a 31 per cent. reduction in leakage in England since April 1997. Over the next year, my Department, Ofwat and the Environment Agency will conduct a joint study into the scope for future leakage reduction.

Contaminated Land

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much contaminated land has been reclaimed in each of the last five years in each local authority area in the north-west of England. [104289]

Mr. Meacher: Information on the amount of contaminated land reclaimed is not held centrally. However, figures are available for the reclamation of derelict land. The table shows the spend by each local authority area, in the north-west region, for each of the last five years, under the Land Reclamation Programme.

DLG/LRP spend

£ million

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*Total*
Cumbria CC	3.19	1.49	2.60	2.17	1.34	—
Allerdale	0.79	0.00	0.11	0.18	0.00	—
Barrow	1.18	0.04	0.00	0.06	0.15	—
Carlisle	0.07	0.06	0.15	0.00	0.01	—
Copeland	0.19	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	—
Eden	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	—
South Lakeland	0.00	0.05	0.29	0.06	0.01	—
Cumbria Total	5.48	1.64	3.15	2.47	1.51	14.25
Lancashire CC	0.09	0.05	0.13	0.21	0.24	—
Blackburn	0.07	1.51	0.17	0.03	0.13	—
Blackpool	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.02	—
Burnley	0.01	0.05	0.07	0.02	0.11	—
Chorley	1.03	0.11	0.02	0.08	0.01	—
Fylde	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	—
Hyndburn	0.93	0.05	0.00	0.27	0.20	—
Lancaster	0.33	0.00	0.10	0.02	0.11	—
Pendle	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.25	0.03	—
Preston	0.23	0.05	1.04	0.28	0.00	—
Ribble V	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.04	—
Rossendale	0.03	0.02	0.22	0.19	0.71	—
South Ribble	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	—
West Lancashire	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	—
Wyre	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	—
Lancashire Total	2.84	1.86	1.75	1.36	1.60	9.41
Knowsley	0.56	0.40	0.02	0.10	0.83	—
Liverpool	0.00	0.35	0.24	0.35	0.18	—
Sefton	0.63	1.06	0.77	0.20	1.33	—
St. Helens	1.62	0.45	0.31	0.56	1.02	—
Wirral	0.43	0.33	0.14	0.37	1.53	—
Merseyside Total	3.24	2.59	1.48	1.58	4.89	13.78
Bolton	0.14	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.02	—
Bury	1.75	0.12	0.48	0.80	1.07	—
Manchester	0.97	0.91	1.12	0.78	0.70	—
Oldham	1.30	0.37	0.21	1.80	0.22	—
Rochdale	0.45	0.26	0.05	0.06	0.10	—
Salford	0.40	0.83	0.39	0.66	0.81	—
Stockport	3.17	0.00	0.00	0.20	0.47	—
Tameside	2.99	0.83	0.18	0.28	0.97	—
Trafford	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.53	0.01	—
Wigan	1.20	0.85	0.87	1.12	0.47	—
Greater Manchester Total	12.37	4.21	3.48	6.30	4.84	31.20
Cheshire CC	1.68	0.09	0.86	–0.19	0.69	—
Chester	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.01	—
Congleton	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	—
Crewe and N	0.08	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	—
E Port and N	1.78	0.18	0.02	0.08	–0.06	—
Halton	0.90	0.29	0.21	0.05	0.11	—
Macclesfield	0.09	0.18	0.01	0.01	0.00	—
Vale Royal	0.30	0.08	0.15	0.12	0.01	—
Warrington	0.31	0.03	0.02	0.00	0.02	—
Cheshire Total	5.14	0.85	1.33	0.08	0.78	8.18
Region Total	29.07	11.15	11.19	11.79	13.62	76.82

Figures are also available for the amount of derelict land estimated to have been reclaimed from approvals under this programme, in the last five years, in the north-west region. These are as follows:

Year	*Hectares*
1994–95	231
1995–96	221
1996–97	70
1997–98	167
1998–99	210

These figures apply to derelict land in general, therefore it should be recognised that not all derelict land is contaminated, and much of the contaminated land which has been remediated is not derelict.

Local Authority Housing

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people have been put on local authority housing waiting lists in London boroughs in each of the last six months. [104363]

Mr. Mullin: Information is not held centrally on the numbers of people joining and leaving local authorities' housing registers/waiting lists.

Beacon Councils

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many beacon councils have reached the Government's target of 25 per cent. recycling; and if he will list *(a)* the level achieved by each Beacon Council for waste management and *(b)* the councils not awarded beacon status which have achieved a higher level. [104290]

Mr. Meacher: There is no recycling target which each individual local authority is expected to meet. There is a national goal to recycle or compost 25 per cent. of household waste by 2005 or earlier.

From the data supplied for the 1997–98 Municipal Waste Survey, three authorities chosen as Beacon Councils in the "Sustainable Development: Dealing with Waste" category have recycling rates of 25 per cent. or over:

Gosport Borough Council
Havant Borough Council
New Forest District Council.

Other non beacon authorities which are achieving 25 per cent. or more, are:

Adur District Council
Chichester District Council
Chiltern District Council
Christchurch Borough Council
East Dorset District Council
Eastleigh Borough Council
North Dorset District Council
Purbeck District Council
Reigate and Banstead Borough Council
South Bucks District Council
Tandridge District Council
Weymouth and Portland Borough Council.

The remaining Beacon Councils are achieving the following recycling rates:

Percentage	*Councils*
Between 20 and 25	Rushmoor District Council St. Edmondsbury Borough Council Test Valley District Council
Between 15 and 20	East Hampshire District Council Fareham District Council Winchester City Council
Between 10 and 15	Basingstoke District Council Bath and North East Somerset Council Hart District Council London Borough of Bexley Portsmouth City Council
Less than 10	London Borough of Hounslow Southampton City Council Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council Wealden District Council

Notes:
1. Recycling rates are calculated as the quantity of household waste collected for recycling, expressed as a percentage of total household waste. These calculations exclude recycling of building rubble, and make no allowance for home composting.
2. In non-unitary areas, the figures cover amounts collected within the area by both the Waste Collection Authority and the Waste Disposal Authority. In most cases, figures for total household waste (apart from amounts collected for recycling) are taken from returns from Waste Disposal Authorities.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in (i) his predecessor departments and English local authorities in 1979 and (ii) his Department and English local authorities in 1999. [104026]

Ms Beverley Hughes: (i) Available records indicate that on 1 January 1979, 26,438 staff were employed in the Department of the Environment and the Department of Transport. Age and gender analysis is not available for that time.

In June 1979, the English Local Authorities employed some 1,813,000 staff. Again, analysis by age and gender is not available.

(ii) On 1 April 1999, 15,520 staff were employed in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, of which 7,794 were men and 7,726 were women. The following is a breakdown into standard age groups for each gender:

Age	*Men*	*Women*
16–17	1	7
18–19	67	101
20–24	366	474
25–29	609	693
30–34	793	1,047
35–39	935	1,332
40–44	1,091	1,240
45–49	1,187	1,064
50 and over	2,745	1,768
Totals	7,794	7,726

This information is not available for employees of Local Authorities. On 12 June 1998, the latest date for which figures are available, some 1,360,000 staff were employed within the English Local Authorities. Age and gender analysis of this total is not available.

Homelessness

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people were registered homeless in London boroughs in each of the last six months. [104362]

Mr. Mullin: Information is published on households accommodated under statutory homelessness provisions in a quarterly Information Bulletin, "Statistics of local authority activities under the homelessness legislation: England". Information on a monthly basis is not collected centrally. Table 2 of the Bulletin presents a quarterly summary by region, including Greater London, of those households accepted as homeless and in priority need under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts.

Copies of the Bulletin are in the Library, and the latest edition, published on 10 December 1999, presents statistics up to the third quarter of 1999.

DEFENCE

Iraq

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many flights by United Kingdom and allied aircraft have taken place over Iraq during the last month; and what quantities of missiles were discharged into Iraq during that period. [103640]

Mr. Hoon: RAF aircraft undertook some 200 operational sorties during the period 18 November to 15 December in pursuit of their mission to prevent Saddam's air forces from persecuting the Kurds and Shia Muslims of northern and southern Iraq. Over this period, the RAF dropped six laser-guided bombs over Iraq in response to Iraqi threats.

Insensitive Munitions

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received on the exploratory talks on insensitive munitions. [104108]

Mr. Kilfoyle: This is a matter for the Chief executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Howe to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 12 January 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about representations received on the exploratory talks on insensitive munitions. This matter falls to me to answer within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

It is not clear from the question which exploratory talks you have in mind, but if there are any further details you can let me have I will of course be happy to give a full reply. However, I can assure you that it is Ministry of Defence policy to ensure that munitions comply with NATO safety standards. One of these standards is that munitions shall be as insensitive as is practicable but still operate as intended.

NATO Defence Capability Initiative

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the British members of the High Level Steering Group of the NATO Defence Capability Initiative and *(b)* the number of meetings so far which they have attended; and when the Defence Capability Initiative is expected to produce conclusions. [104270]

Mr. Hoon: The UK's representative at the High Level Steering Group is the Director General for International Security Policy (DGISP), who is supported by the Defence Counsellor at the UK Delegation to NATO. DGISP has attended, or been represented at, all four of the Group's meetings to date. It will be some years before the DCI is complete but work is well under way.

Asbestos

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 260W, if he will list the types of vessels which have undergone the programme to eliminate asbestos from on board; when he expects the programme to be completed; what is the estimated cost; and if he will make a statement. [104349]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The comprehensive programme to eliminate asbestos is in its early stages and is expected to continue over the next 10 years, being undertaken during planned maintenance periods and refits. There are likely to be cases where it may be safer to leave the asbestos in place, undisturbed and sealed for the service life of the vessel. The use of asbestos in Royal Naval vessels is governed by the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987, as amended. Safe alternatives have been fitted wherever practicable since the inception of the Regulations.

It is estimated that the total cost of the programme to eliminate asbestos, wherever practicable, will be about £7.5 million. This includes the cost of replacement stocks.

Imphal Barracks (Civilian Staff)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to answer the question tabled on 19 November for answer on 23 November by the hon. Member of Vale for York concerning the number of civilian staff employed at Imphal Barracks. [103760]

Mr. Spellar: I replied to the hon. Member on 21 December 1999.

PRIME MINISTER

Barnsley

Q15. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Prime Minister when he next expects to visit Barnsley. [103458]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 353W, concerning the public disclosure

of discussions at the JCCC, if he will investigate the source of the press reports of the JCCC meeting on 13 December. [104138]

The Prime Minister: No.

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister when he expects to receive the Sixth report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life. [104643]

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to announce that Lord Neill has today published the Committee's Sixth Report. The report reviews the implementation of the recommendations from its First Report.

The Government welcome the report. We will need to consider carefully the recommendations and will give a detailed response to the report in due course.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Animal Research

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the funding of researchers through MRC or ARC grants to travel abroad to conduct research on animals. [104282]

Ms Hewitt: The MRC and BBSRC (formerly known as ARC) do not provide funds for any animal research unless the work proposed is of high quality, the need to use animals has been properly justified, and any suffering is minimised.

Collaborations between UK scientists and their counterparts in the USA, Europe, or other countries play an important role in ensuring the quality and efficiency of UK scientific research, and avoiding duplication. Researchers supported through MRC and BBSRC grants will often pursue joint projects with researchers in other countries, and a small proportion of these may involve animals.

The MRC and BBSRC expects UK researchers collaborating overseas to ensure standards at least meet those set out in the individual Research Council's own ethical guidelines. The Research Councils will not provide grant funds for animal research if it appears that it is being done overseas in order to reduce costs or to bypass the high standards set in the UK.

Very occasionally, MRC has provided funds for work on health problems in developing countries where the medical problem being studied—for example, transmission of parasites from animals to people—has meant the research had to be done in the developing country.

BBSRC funds the travel and subsistence costs of researchers to enable them to visit overseas research laboratories for short periods. Research on animals may be involved, but the annual number of such travel and subsistence is small, and those involving animal research is a small fraction of this.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people joined the Full Time Education and Training Option of the New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds between January 1998 and the end of July 1999, by unit of delivery; how many and what percentage of these *(a)* completed their courses before leaving the New Deal, *(b)* left their courses before completing them and *(c)* left at any stage for unknown destinations. [100807]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 2 December 1999]:* The information available currently is shown in the following table. The Full-Time Education and Training (FTET) Option is designed to give people the skills that they need to get jobs; of the 7,891 young people shown as having left the Option early, 3,200 or 40 per cent. had found jobs. A recent survey has shown that 57 per cent. of young people leaving New Deal for unknown destinations had found a job.

Unit of delivery	*Starts to FTET option between January 1998 and July 1999*	*Of which, number who had left New Deal by the end of September 1999*	*Number recorded as completing FTET option before leaving New Deal*	*As a percentage of those for whom completed/ left early is known*	*Number recorded as leaving FTET option early before leaving New Deal*	*As a percentage of those for whom completed/ left early is known*	*Number who had left for an unknown destination by the end of September 1999*	*As a percentage of those who had left New Deal by the end of September 1999*
Tayside	474	323	61	36	109	64	47	15
Ayrshire	371	242	37	25	113	75	29	12
Borders	64	34	1	7	14	93	8	24
Dumfries and Galloway	181	101	23	40	35	60	19	19
Dunbarton	211	103	15	28	38	72	21	20
Edinburgh, East and Mid Lothian	317	200	24	29	58	71	40	20
Fife	479	295	48	30	113	70	60	20
Forth Valley'	294	145	18	24	58	76	31	21
Glasgow	1,112	570	74	24	240	76	133	23
Grampian	134	80	11	28	29	73	15	19
Moray, Strathspay and Badenoch	35	23	7	70	3	30	7	30
Lanarkshire	651	348	23	12	176	88	65	19
Renfrewshire	272	153	22	23	73	77	36	24
West Lothian	98	60	7	21	26	79	12	20
Argyll and The Islands	20	9	0	0	3	100	1	11
Caithness and Sutherland	30	15	1	14	6	86	2	13
Inverness and Nairn	44	22	8	53	7	47	5	23
Lochaber	6	2	0	0	1	100	0	0
Western Isles	30	17	7	88	1	13	4	24
Orkney	6	2	1	100	0	0	0	0

Unit of delivery	Starts to FTET option between January 1998 and July 1999	Of which, number who had left New Deal by the end of September 1999	Number recorded as completing FTET option before leaving New Deal	As a percentage of those for whom completed/ left early is known	Number recorded as leaving FTET option early before leaving New Deal	As a percentage of those for whom completed/ left early is known	Number who had left for an unknown destination by the end of September 1999	As a percentage of those who had left New Deal by the end of September 1999
Ross and Cromarty	43	28	9	64	5	36	4	14
Shetland	6	4	0	0	1	100	4	100
Skye and Lochalsh	5	1	0	—	0	—	0	0
Newcastle, Gateshead and South Tyneside	1,665	891	161	36	281	64	198	22
Northumberland	406	185	43	38	69	62	28	15
Tyneside North[1]	415	167	36	40	54	60	31	19
Durham North and Durham South	1,038	526	91	29	225	71	129	25
City of Sunderland formerly Wearside	767	363	79	42	110	58	74	20
Tees North and Tees South	1,480	597	84	28	216	72	157	26
Cumbria	478	235	36	30	83	70	41	17
Wirral	524	318	53	32	113	68	58	18
Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre	127	78	7	20	28	80	20	26
Bolton	116	58	8	47	9	53	11	19
Bury	115	56	12	55	10	45	19	34
Central Lancashire	128	72	5	13	33	87	16	22
Cheshire	222	94	5	11	42	89	22	23
City Pride Manchester	874	394	58	36	102	64	100	25
East Lancashire	283	148	22	24	69	76	37	25
Halton and Warrington	335	151	9	18	42	82	27	18
Knowsley	552	273	18	13	125	87	77	28
Liverpool	1,438	633	79	26	220	74	146	23
North Lancashire	137	79	16	32	34	68	22	28
Oldham	141	63	2	10	18	90	18	29
Rochdale	259	160	13	20	51	80	48	30
Sefton	395	209	31	36	55	64	43	21
St. Helens	244	97	11	21	41	79	20	21
Stockport	120	60	8	26	23	74	23	38
West Lancashire[1]	104	35	7	70	3	30	4	11
Wigan	177	83	5	12	37	88	26	31
Sheffield	1,044	558	93	35	174	65	149	27
Rotherham	664	357	57	28	145	72	95	27
South Humber[1]	242	92	4	8	44	92	26	28
Calderdale and Kirklees	652	295	40	25	118	75	98	33
Barnsley and The Dearne	646	303	19	14	115	86	83	27
Bradford	780	442	71	30	166	70	132	30
Hull and East Coast formerly Hull	883	433	42	27	114	73	104	24
Leeds	511	269	23	21	86	79	89	33
North Yorkshire	322	184	33	35	62	65	52	28
Wakefield and Doncaster	791	453	43	16	219	84	124	27
West Wales	365	180	26	29	65	71	51	28
Swansea	488	307	42	26	118	74	81	26
North West Wales	214	96	15	37	26	63	15	16
Powys	60	30	6	38	10	63	6	20
Ceredigion	59	28	6	46	7	54	7	25
North East Wales formerly Flintshire and Wrexham	133	55	4	29	10	71	9	16
North Wales Coast	146	66	12	40	18	60	17	26
Cardiff and Vale	358	206	31	37	53	63	49	24
Bridgend and Glamorgan Valleys[1]	289	114	13	27	35	73	26	23
Heads of the Valley and Caerphilly	389	179	17	18	76	82	26	15
Newport, Torfaen and Monmouth	217	125	17	23	56	77	32	26
Black Country	1,515	727	74	24	239	76	190	26
Birmingham	1,538	556	62	36	112	64	157	28
Solihull[1]	198	82	3	8	35	92	22	27
Staffordshire	526	223	15	14	91	86	59	26
Hereford and Worcester	177	101	17	35	32	65	26	26
Coventry	318	161	16	30	37	70	48	30
Warwickshire	155	78	12	34	23	66	28	36
Shropshire	158	74	5	17	24	83	22	30
Southern Derbyshire	419	240	24	25	72	75	57	24
Cambridge TTWA	141	71	12	43	16	57	17	24
North Derbyshire	313	164	26	33	54	68	33	20
Leicestershire[1]	442	173	13	21	50	79	64	37
Lincolnshire	350	184	30	30	70	70	58	32
Norfolk	506	252	40	31	91	69	37	15
West Norfolk	79	42	3	10	26	90	11	26
Northamptonshire	147	93	9	20	35	80	27	29
Greater Nottingham	590	260	34	27	94	73	78	30
North Nottinghamshire	391	157	24	27	64	73	41	26
Peterborough	147	85	10	21	38	79	26	31
Suffolk	369	173	30	32	64	68	30	17
Waveney	171	55	14	44	18	56	7	13
Cornwall	433	286	64	47	73	53	60	21
Bath and North East Somerset and North Somerset	86	49	5	26	14	74	10	20

Unit of delivery	Starts to FTET option between January 1998 and July 1999	Of which, number who had left New Deal by the end of September 1999	Number recorded as completing FTET option before leaving New Deal	As a percentage of those for whom completed/ left early is known	Number recorded as leaving FTET option early before leaving New Deal	As a percentage of those for whom completed/ left early is known	Number who had left for an unknown destination by the end of September 1999	As a percentage of those who had left New Deal by the end of September 1999
Bristol and South Gloucestershire formerly Central Bristol	317	151	15	18	67	82	52	34
Dorset	260	159	26	31	57	69	43	27
Exeter and East Devon[1]	144	57	6	21	23	79	10	18
Torbay and South Devon formerly South Devon	199	112	13	19	57	81	21	19
North Devon	64	38	10	59	7	41	10	26
Gloucestershire	149	91	9	22	32	78	19	21
Plymouth	501	279	39	26	111	74	63	23
Somerset	242	136	19	28	48	72	36	26
Wiltshire and Swindon formerly Wiltshire	154	90	10	19	42	81	22	24
Eastbourne and Hastings formerly Eastbourne	261	162	20	27	55	73	57	35
Lambeth	367	183	33	52	30	48	63	34
Harlow	51	32	3	20	12	80	15	47
Hackney and City[1]	580	150	20	36	35	64	42	28
Hertfordshire	320	181	13	19	55	81	59	33
Brighton	154	65	8	31	18	69	17	26
Canterbury	242	120	15	31	34	69	36	30
Channel	156	78	10	31	22	69	19	24
Chatham	300	148	20	25	59	75	43	29
Crawley	35	19	3	33	6	67	8	42
Croydon and Bromley	240	111	10	23	33	77	32	29
Guildford	79	55	10	36	18	64	15	27
Lewisham	305	86	11	41	16	59	27	31
Maidstone, Dartford and West Kent	97	54	6	25	18	75	10	19
Southwark	467	179	14	30	32	70	55	31
Greenwich	402	139	17	37	29	63	33	24
Bexley	114	44	7	30	16	70	9	20
Sutton, Merton Esher, Kingston, Epsom	164	76	8	38	13	62	19	25
Wandsworth	223	95	16	43	21	57	39	41
West Sussex Coastal Plain	56	28	2	18	9	82	14	50
South Essex	353	192	31	49	32	51	42	22
North Essex[1] formerly North and Mid Essex	275	151	24	32	52	68	35	23
Edgware and Leaside	801	320	39	40	58	60	107	33
North East London	398	176	35	40	52	60	68	39
Havering, Barking and Dagenham	257	133	18	37	31	63	34	26
Newham	609	157	23	43	31	57	49	31
Tower Hamlets	299	109	20	83	4	17	39	36
Camden and North Islington	338	96	20	65	11	35	30	31
Ealing and Hillingdon formerly Ealing	260	105	11	37	19	63	38	36
Bedfordshire and Luton	339	213	19	22	68	78	40	19
Milton Keynes and North Buckinghamshire	92	51	6	21	22	79	16	31
Mid Hants	38	18	3	38	5	63	6	33
Oxfordshire	177	82	6	21	23	79	19	23
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	393	229	26	29	65	71	75	33
Isle of Wight	126	52	6	32	13	68	17	33
Reading	36	24	1	13	7	88	5	21
Slough	137	70	13	35	24	65	19	27
Southampton and South West Hampshire	167	99	16	39	25	61	36	36
Wembley	482	208	29	45	35	55	58	28
Westminster	115	30	1	13	7	88	7	23
Hounslow and Richmond	181	94	17	40	25	60	30	32
Hammersmith, Fulham, Kensington, Chelsea	270	87	4	20	16	80	23	26
Great Britain[2]	48,631	23,674	3,213	29	7,891	71	5,998	25

[1] A private Sector led Unit of Delivery

[2] Great Britain excludes those for whom no Unit of Delivery is recorded on the New Deal Evaluation Database

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people *(a)* have found sustained unsubsidised employment of 13 weeks or more, *(b)* are on follow-through and *(c)* have left for destinations other than sustained unsubsidised employment of 13 weeks or more from the New Deal scheme. [102108]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* The New Deals have made an excellent start in helping unemployed people into work. Latest figures to the end of October 1999 show that, through the New Deal for Young People, 107,280 people have found sustained unsubsidised employment, 22,980 young people were on Follow-Through and 144,290 young people were recorded

as having left New Deal for destinations other than sustained unsubsidised employment.

Of the 144,290 recorded as destinations other than sustained employment, 30,060 transferred to another benefit, 44,750 went to another known destination and 69,480 went to an unknown destination. A recently published study reporting on clients who left the Gateway stage of New Deal for an unknown destination and whose JSA claim which qualified them for New Deal had been closed found that 57 per cent. of them left New Deal to go into paid employment. Over 100,000 young people have gained training and work experience in the non-employment options.

Through the New Deal for long-term unemployed people aged 25 and over, equivalent figures were 19,730 into sustained unsubsidised employment, 990 older clients on the Follow-Through stage and 94,100 to destinations other than sustained unsubsidised employment.

A further 24,430 unemployed people under these two New Deals have found sustained subsidised employment.

A sustained job is one where the client does not return to JSA or New Deal within 13 weeks.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many young people in West Sussex have been through the New Deal scheme; and how many have subsequently found unsubsidised employment. [104273]

Ms Jowell: The latest statistics to the end of October 1999 show that of the 676 young people who started New Deal in the West Sussex Coastal Plain Unit of Delivery, 447 had left. It is encouraging that in West Sussex, 347 young people have found unsubsidised employment when they were benefiting from the New Deal. Others will have found work without informing the Employment Service.

Unemployment (Ethnic Minorities)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of unemployment among members of ethnic minority groups; and if he will make a statement. [103248]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Figures from the Labour Force Survey are as follows:

Employment

	Level (thousand)	*Rate (percentage)*	*Change in rate over last year percentage points*
All	—	—	—
White	26,200	75.6	+0.8
All ethnic minority groups	1,350	58.3	+2.0
Black	400	62.8	+1.7
Indian	420	68.0	+2.9
Pakistani/Bangladeshi	220	40.8	+0.9
Chinese	60	55.6	+5.6
Other origins	255	60.2	+1.6

ILO unemployment

	Level (thousand)	*Rate (percentage)*	*Change in rate over last year percentage points*
All	—	—	—
White	1,600	5.7	−0.4
All ethnic minority groups	200	13.3	−0.8
Black	75	15.5	−0.2
Indian	40	8.7	+0.2
Pakistani/Bangladeshi	55	19.5	−4.6
Chinese	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Other origins	35	12.6	−1.6

[1] Sample size too small for reliable estimate

Note:

Figures are for summer 1999, not seasonally adjusted

The unemployment rate among ethnic minority groups is unacceptably high but is improving. The Government are committed to ensuring that this improvement continues and are working with key partners on a range of measures to bring about equality of opportunity in the labour market for all groups in society.

The Department's Race Relations Employment Advisory Service (RREAS) provides a free advice and consultancy service to employers to help develop and implement equal opportunity policies and practices for racial equality among the work force. The Department also publishes a range of guidance to promote racial equality in employment including "Equal Opportunities—Ten Point Plan for Employers".

The Department is working with others, including the Commission for Racial Equality, to promote the message to employers that racial diversity in the workplace is essential for good business practice. The Department has also recently established a new strategic race advisory body called the Race Education and Employment Forum. Its remit is to consider and advise Ministers on matters relating to the progress of ethnic minorities in education, employment and training.

The Department has recently led the work of the Policy Action Team on Jobs, whose members included officials from a number of Government Departments, as well as external organisations. It was asked to develop an action plan to reduce the difference between levels of worklessness in poor neighbourhoods and the national average, and within that to reduce the disproportionate unemployment rates for people from ethnic minorities. The PAT's report was published last month and its recommendations will be considered as part of the Social Exclusion Unit's work developing a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal.

The Department has also commissioned research into a wide range of aspects of the labour market experience of ethnic minority groups, including the transition from education to work, adult learning among ethnic minorities and the education and labour market position of young black men.

Remploy

Mr. Tom Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he has received a copy of the Bourton report on Remploy; and what plans he has to make the Bourton report available to *(a)* hon. Members, *(b)* employee representatives and *(c)* the general public. [104095]

Ms Hodge: As the Minister responsible for Remploy, I can confirm that I have received a copy of the interim report from the Bourton Group on Remploy. This report is a commercially sensitive document about the strategic development and management of a competitive company. For that reason I do not intend to make copies of the report more widely available.

Mr. Tom Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress in the consultation exercise on the future of Remploy factories. [104096]

Ms Hodge: Consultation about the current Remploy Corporate Plan (1999–2002) has been extensive. Remploy employees, trade union officials, relevant Local Authorities and local MPs/Members of the Welsh Assembly have all been given full opportunity to give input and discuss the Plan with Directors of Remploy.

In addition, since 15 September 1999 there have been five meetings between representatives of the Remploy Trades Union Consortium and the Board of Directors of Remploy to discuss the Corporate Plan for 2000–03. These meetings have been constructive. This consultation is due to finish later this month. No final decisions will be made on any modernisation proposals until this consultation is concluded.

All those with an interest in Remploy are also being invited to contribute to the Quinquennial Review of Remploy. The prior option stage of the review, which was announced in the House on 18 November, is due to be completed by the end of March 2000.

Finally, my officials have been undertaking a consultation exercise about how the Supported Employment Programme as a whole could be developed to open up more opportunities for disabled people to work and progress into open employment. A wide range of organisations and individuals have responded, including trade unions, voluntary and statutory organisations and any others with an interest in the employment of people with disabilities. The responses are currently being collated and analysed.

Standards Fund

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to reduce the bureaucracy brought about by varied bidding criteria for the Standards Fund. [104395]

Ms Estelle Morris: For the Standards Fund for 2000–01 we have reduced the number of grants allocated via competitive bidding. Seven of the 38 grants for 2000–01 required competitive bidding, compared to 10 in 1999–2000 and 14 in 1998–99.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Night Shelters

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the law in respect of *(a)* the provision of day and night shelter places to people who may be drug users and *(b)* the vulnerability of managers, staff and trustees of day and night shelters to charges of not preventing the use or the supply of banned drugs. [R] [103912]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No. Day and night shelters are subject to the provisions of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and must operate in accordance with the law. Decisions on whether to offer day and night shelter places to people who may be drug users are for the managers of individual establishments. Managers, staff and trustees of day and night shelters should ensure that all reasonable steps are taken to prevent the supply or use of controlled drugs on the premises in accordance with the law. However, we do recognise the concerns of some agencies following the recent conviction of Ruth Wyner and John Brock and we will therefore consider, with the relevant agencies, whether further guidance is needed in this area.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department and in police forces and fire departments in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104027]

Mr. Straw: The numbers of men and women employed in the standard age groups for 1999 are set out in the tables. The available published staffing figures for 1979 may be found in Civil Service Statistics 1979, a copy of which is in the Library. Where possible, information has been given at or near the 1 April 1999. It has not, however, been possible to provide Prison Service figures on this basis: this information is as at 21 December 1999. Age breakdowns for the Fire and Police Services are not available in the form requested except at disproportionate cost.

Age bands	*16–19*	*20–24*	*25–29*	*30–34*	*35–39*	*40–44*	*45–49*	*50+*	*Total*
Non Prison Service Home Office as at 1 April 1999									
(a) Men[1]	9	159	541	810	748	665	760	1,471	5,163
(b) Women	32	286	882	1,145	920	629	643	1,028	5,565
Grand total	41	445	1,423	1,955	1,668	1,294	1,403	2,499	10,728
Prison Service as at 21 December 1999									
(a) Men	39	515	1,886	4,692	5,552	4,770	4,396	10,128	31,978
(b) Women	69	822	1,615	2,057	2,054	1,599	1,323	2,010	11,549
Grand total	109	1,337	3,501	6,749	7,606	6,369	5,719	12,138	43,528

[1] Figures are for permanent non-industrial staff

For the Police Service, the following figures were published in the Home Office Statistical Bulletin 14/99 on 26 August 1999 and are available in the Library.

Police Service staffing figures at March 1999

	Number
Male	105,379
Female	20,038

For the Fire Service, the following figures were published in the Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire Services for England and Wales 1998–99 in December 1999 and are available in the Library.

Fire Service staffing figures at 31 March 1999

	Male	*Female*
Wholetime uniformed staff [1]	33,398	258
Control room staff	312	1,164
Retained staff [2]	14,421	244
Total	48,131	1,666

[1] Wholetime is full-time operational workforce
[2] Retained staff refers to part-time firefighters employed on a retaining fee

Umbrellas

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many umbrellas his Department purchased for use by persons queuing outside passport offices during the summer of 1999; how much was spent on them; what plans he has to dispose of them; and what estimate he has made of their resale value. [103959]

Mrs. Roche: The number of umbrellas purchased for each passport office during the summer was 200, totalling 1,200 in all. These cost £10.50 plus VAT for each item for supply and delivery, £14,805 in total. There are currently no plans to dispose of the umbrellas and, therefore, no estimate has been made of their resale value.

Gamma Hydroxy Butyrate

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many successful prosecutions have been made against illicit *(a)* advertisers, *(b)* suppliers and *(c)* manufacturers of gamma hydroxy butyrate in each of the last five years. [103374]

Ms Stuart: I have been asked to reply.

All cases prosecuted by the Medicines Control Agency to date have been successful. The statistics in respect of prosecutions to date are as follows:

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*Total*
Advertising	5	2	0	0	0	7
Supply	2	0	0	1	6	9
Manufacture	2	0	0	1	2	5
Total	9	2	0	2	8	21

Further investigations of gamma hydroxy butyrate are currently ongoing and referrals in respect of GHB are always investigated.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Exports

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department plans to introduce measures to bring licensed production agreements within the strategic export control legislation. [104155]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) on 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 458W.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104028]

Mr. Hain: It is not possible to provide a breakdown for the standard age groups employed in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for 1979 as detailed information prior to 1990 is not available. The breakdown for the standard age groups for 1 April 1999 is as follows:

	Men	*Women*
16–19	9	10
20–24	63	68
25–29	381	356
30–34	598	509
35–39	460	333
40–44	443	197
45–49	468	161
50+	1,063	365

NORTHERN IRELAND

Punishment Beatings

6. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement about the number of punishment beatings in the last six months. [103418]

Mr. Ingram: During the period 1 July to 22 December 1999, there were a total of 76 paramilitary style attacks. There were 24 shootings and 33 assaults attributed to Loyalist groups and five shootings and 14 assaults attributed to Republican groups.

North/South Ministerial Council

8. **Mrs. Ellman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what consultation he has held with the North/South Ministerial Council concerning economic development in the last 12 months. [103420]

19. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what consultation he has had with the north/south Ministerial Council. [103431]

Mr. George Howarth: None. Since devolution on 2 December, economic development in Northern Ireland is a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly. The North/South Ministerial Council and the Trade and Business Development Board have a role to play where this involves co-operation between the Assembly and the Dail. Both the Council and the Body are accountable to the Assembly and the Dail.

Good Friday Agreement

10. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made on the implementation of the Good Friday agreement. [103422]

24. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Belfast agreement. [103436]

27. **Mr. Randall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Belfast agreement. [103439]

Mr. George Howarth: We have set up the new devolved institutions for Northern Ireland and transferred powers to them. We have implemented new treaties with the Irish Government to set up new institutions for North/South co-operation and the new British-Irish Council. We have set up a new Human Rights Commission. An independent report on policing has been published and an independent report on criminal justice will be published shortly. Authorised representatives of the main paramilitary organisations are meeting with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning, and the Commission will report later this month.

15. **Mr. Levitt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on international support for the peace process in Northern Ireland. [103427]

Mr. Mandelson: There has been enormous international interest and support for the peace process over many years, both from foreign governments and non-governmental organisations, as well as from individuals. This support has come from many parts of the world, including North America, Europe, Australia, the Far East and South Africa, and has played an important part in enhancing the prospects for peace in Northern Ireland. Support has taken many forms including the direct personal interest shown by various Heads of Government, including President Clinton; the appointment of international figures to assist in the political negotiations and with the Independent Commission on Decommissioning; and the important financial support that has been given by the European Union, through the Peace and Reconciliation Package; the Ireland Funds and by the International Fund for Ireland.

18. **Mr. Ivan Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made in establishing east/west bodies under the Good Friday agreement. [103430]

Mr. George Howarth: The British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference were formally established on 2 December 1999 at the same time as the British-Irish Agreement came into force and met for the first time on 17 December 1999. These institutions represent significant developments in the relationship between the UK and Ireland and offer an opportunity for real and meaningful co-operation between the two Governments and, in the case of the British-Irish Council, the devolved administrations also.

Security

11. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made towards establishing a more normal security situation in Northern Ireland. [103423]

Mr. Ingram: Since the Good Friday Agreement, routine military patrolling has been reduced by two thirds. Three battalions have returned to Great Britain. There are now under 15,000 service personnel on operational duties in Northern Ireland, fewer than at any time since 1970. Eleven military bases have been demolished and a further seven installations have been closed.

Further steps the Government intend to take towards normalising security are set out in the recently published security strategy paper. Copies have been placed in the Library of this House.

Decommissioning

12. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress is being made with decommissioning. [103424]

21. **Mrs. Roe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will set out a timetable for the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives. [103433]

22. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made towards decommissioning under the Good Friday agreement; and if he will make a statement. [103434]

Mr. Mandelson: I refer the hon. Members to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friends the Members for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy), and for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman), and the hon. Members for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) and for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson).

Equality Commission

13. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the Government's liaison with the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland. [103425]

14. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on Government consultation with the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland. [103426]

Mr. George Howarth: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland was formally established on 1 October 1999. It has taken over the functions of the Equal Opportunities Commission for Northern Ireland, the Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland, the Fair Employment Commission and the Disability Council for Northern Ireland.

The existence and membership of the Equality Commission are reserved matters, as is the obligation on equality of opportunity and good relations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The funding and

administrative oversight of the Equality Commission is a devolved matter and responsibility for this falls to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has a number of powers and duties in relation to the section 75 obligation including:

making an order for the designation of additional public authorities to be covered by the equality obligation;

approving the statutory guidelines prepared by the Equality Commission on equality schemes.

The Northern Ireland Act clearly defines the vast majority of public bodies to which the section 75 obligation will apply. However, the Secretary of State may designate additional bodies, including UK departments carrying out functions relating to Northern Ireland, to which the obligation should apply. I met the Equality Commission on 20 December to discuss the contents of the proposed designation order. We hope that the order will be approved by Parliament early this year.

The Government have also submitted comments to the Equality Commission on the contents of the proposed statutory guidelines, which we hope will be finalised early this year.

Patten Report

16. **Mr. McGrady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made of the Patten report on policing; and when he plans to introduce legislation to give effect to its proposals. [103428]

Mr. Ingram: On 9 September 1999, when the Patten Commission issued its report, the Government immediately announced that it accepted the findings in principle. At the same time, we launched a consultation process on the report, as we were required to do under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Consultation formally ended on 30 November.

Restorative Justice

20. **Mr. Dawson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the development of restorative justice schemes. [103432]

Mr. Ingram: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Kali Mountford).

Royal Ulster Constabulary

23. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the international role of the RUC. [103435]

Mr. Ingram: In accordance with the provisions of Section 8 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, the Royal Ulster Constabulary have seven officers serving with the United Nations International Police Task Force in Bosnia where they are monitoring the performance of the Bosnian police service. Sixty RUC officers are also with the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, where they are undertaking an executive policing role pending a new Kosovan police service being trained and ready to take over law enforcement there.

26. **Mr. Thompson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many members of the RUC are involved in peacekeeping duties in Bosnia and Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [103438]

Mr. Ingram: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) on 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 159.

Victim Support

25. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what new initiatives are being implemented to support the victims of the troubles in Northern Ireland. [103437]

Mr. Ingram: I have announced significant new funding initiatives to support victims of the Troubles, including £3 million core funding for groups which help and support victims and an extra £1 million for the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund. A Newsletter outlining progress has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Terrorist Weapons

28. **Mr. William Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many weapons held by terrorist organisations in Northern Ireland have been surrendered since 1 December. [103440]

Mr. Mandelson: No weapons held by terrorist organisations in Northern Ireland have been surrendered during the period in question. The International Independent Commission on Decommissioning continues to hold discussions with authorised representatives of paramilitary organisations on the modalities of decommissioning and has indicated its intention to publish by the end of this month.

Violent Crime

29. **Liz Blackman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress he is making on tackling violent crime in Northern Ireland. [103442]

Mr. Ingram: Provisional figures on violent crime for the period April to October 1999 and the final comparable figures for the same period in 1998 show some positive trends. Although the number of offences recorded has increased by 8.7 per cent., the clearance rate is disproportionately higher with a 28.4 per cent. improvement. As a result, clearance rates for violent crime compare favourably (58.6 per cent.) with the previous year (49.7 per cent.). It should be noted that these figures are not comparable with the figures in the last report of the Chief Constable which were produced under the old Home Office counting rules.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104023]

Mr. Mandelson: The figures for 1999 are as follows:

Age	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*
16–20	14	3	17
21–25	77	58	135
26–30	185	156	341
31–35	266	337	603
36–40	207	509	716
41–45	172	580	752
46–50	94	629	723
51–55	114	479	593
56–60	53	168	221
60–65	25	13	38
Total	1,207	2,932	4,139

Note:
Figures include Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Prison Service staff.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide comparable figures for 1979. For the smaller Home Civil Service Group of the NIO, the annual Civil Service Statistics publication provides a departmental breakdown of staff by gender for both years and Service-wide information by age.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Human Rights

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with Commonwealth countries as to their human rights record in the last three years; and if she will list the countries and the dates such discussions took place. [104050]

Clare Short: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to him on 8 February 1999, *Official Report*, column 34W.

Landmines

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the countries where her Department is helping in the clearance of landmines. [104047]

Clare Short: My Department is currently funding mine clearance projects in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Jordan, Iraq, Laos, Mozambique, Nicaragua and Kosovo.

Conservation Projects

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact of conservation projects, which have been *(a)* funded and *(b)* part funded by her Department, upon the indigenous peoples of Africa. [104184]

Clare Short: My Department provides a Project Completion Report for all our major projects. The reports provide an indication of project success, early impacts, the expected longer term impact, including impact on local people.

We have also recently completed a substantial global evaluation of British bilateral and joint-funded project support for environmental improvement and protection. Overall, nearly two thirds of these projects achieved their objectives successfully. A key finding was that the protection and better management of the environment is critical to the achievement of the International Development Targets. We are currently preparing a policy paper which addresses the contribution of environmental protection to the overall aim of poverty elimination.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what guidelines her Department has issued to *(a)* assess the needs and *(b)* protect the rights of indigenous peoples who (i) are likely to be and (ii) have been affected by conservation projects (1) funded and (2) part funded by her Department. [104185]

Clare Short: Along with other member states, we are party to a resolution of the Development Council of the European Union on "Indigenous peoples within the framework of the development co-operation of the Community and Member States". This was passed by the Development Council in November 1998, having been helped through the negotiation process under our own Presidency of the EU in the first half of that year. The resolution recognises the important role played by indigenous people in the management of natural resources and the maintenance of biodiversity. It recognises their rights to choose their own development paths and to have a direct voice in development programmes which affect their way of life. We actively uphold these principles in our all-bilateral work, and in the work we do in collaboration with others.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Spending Revisions

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 40W, on spending revisions, if he will estimate the number of recipients of each of the allowances and benefits listed in the table *(a)* in Wales and *(b)* in Merthyr Tydfil (i) currently and (ii) in 2000–01 and 2001–02. [103372]

Mr. Darling: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

The numbers of recipients of the relevant benefits in Merthyr Tydfil and Wales for the current year derived from administrative data held

Thousand

	Wales	*Merthyr Tydfil*
Incapacity Benefit	145.3	6.0
Severe Disablement Allowance	25.2	0.5
Attendance Allowance	94.8	2.2
Disability Living Allowance	172.4	5.9

Note:
Forecasts of numbers of claimants for each social security benefit by country and/or local authority area is not available.
Sources:
1. The figures for Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance are taken from a 5 per cent. scan of the benefit computer system in Great Britain at 31 May 1999 and are subject to a rating factor to account for missing postcodes.
2. The figures for Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance are taken from 100 per cent. data at 31 May 1999.

Income Support (Scotland)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people aged under 18 years in Scotland have received Income Support with a care premium in each year since 1991. [103758]

Mr. Bayley: Insufficient data are available in each of the years since 1991 reliably to estimate the number of people aged under 18 years who received the carer premium with their Income Support.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many cases are being dealt with by the Child Support Agency in England and Wales. [103727]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mrs. Faith Boardman to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 11 January 2000:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

The most current statistical information available shows:

The number of live and assessed cases being dealt with by the Agency where the Parent with Care lives in Wales was 65,700.

The number of live and assessed cases being dealt with by the Agency where the Parent with Care lives in England was 818,420.

I hope that this is helpful.

Mortgage Payments

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to raise the standard interest rate applicable to benefits in relation to mortgage payments. [104070]

Mr. Bayley: The Standard Interest Rate is based on the weighted average of basic rates charged by the main building societies. It currently stands at 6.66 per cent. and will change only if there is an increase or decrease in this figure of 0.25 per cent. or more. The average figure is calculated by The Building Societies Commission and notified to the Department of Social Security by the Office for National Statistics.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104022]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Number of men and women employed by the Department in 1979 and 1999

	DHSS staff by age and gender 1979			*DSS staff by age and gender 1999*		
Age	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
16–19	2,437	8,325	10,762	824	1,650	2,474
20–24	5,909	15,599	21,508	2,639	5,003	7,642
25–29	5,012	8,369	13,381	4,354	8,675	13,029
30–34	4,154	5,238	9,392	5,173	12,475	17,612
35–39	2,505	3,848	6,353	4,695	12,312	17,007
40–44	2,046	3,597	5,643	4,300	9,929	14,229
45–49	2,138	4,577	6,715	3,570	7,312	10,882
50–75	11,700	12,969	21,669	4,146	8,297	12,443
Other	2	3	5	—	—	—
Total	35,903	62,525	98,482	29,701	65,653	95,354

Notes:

1. The 1979 figures relate to the Department of Health and Social Security at April 1979.
2. The 1999 figures relate to the Department of Social Security at April 1999 and exclude the Contributions Agency which transferred to the Inland Revenue in April 1999.

Sources:

Cabinet Office Mandate data

DSS FAMIS Payroll

HEALTH

Medicines (Licences)

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many licence applications there were for medicines in each year since 1990; [100816]

(2) what was the total number of licence applications for medicines intended solely for the treatment of children in each year since 1995; [100818]

(3) what action the Medicines Control Agency is taking to *(a)* monitor and *(b)* implement the EU guidance on the licensing of medicines used in the treatment of children; [100817]

(4) how many pharmaceutical companies in the United Kingdom comply with EU guidance on the licensing of medicines used in the treatment of children; [100815]

(5) what was the total number of licence applications for medicines used in the treatment of children and adults in each year since 1995. [100819]

Yvette Cooper: Information on how many pharmaceutical companies are complying with European Union guidance on the licensing of medicines used in the treatment of children is not held centrally.

The Medicines Control Agency assesses all applications for Marketing Authorisation (licences) in accordance with current EU legislation and guidance. This includes the guidance on the licensing of medicines used in the treatment of children. This guidance is not legally binding on companies. Applicants are asked to provide details of paediatric development plans if these are relevant and have been omitted from the application. Where appropriate, the MCA will indicate to the applicant that they should consider developing formulations which are suitable for children.

The total number of marketing authorisation applications for medicines in each year since 1990,

excluding applications from homoeopathic products and applications to import licensed medicinal products from other member states of the EU were:

Year	Number
1990	939
1991	762
1992	1,055
1993	1,316
1994	1,277
1995	1,345
1996	1,349
1997	1,847
1999	1,290

The total number of licence applications for medicines intended solely for the treatment of children in each year since 1995 were:

Year	Number
1995	40
1996	28
1997	54
1998	28

The total number of marketing authorisation applications for medicines used in the treatment of children and adults in each year since 1995 were:

Year	Number
1995	555
1996	513
1997	681
1998	504

Fluoridation

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about the constitutional and civil liberties implications of compulsory fluoridation of the water supply. [101131]

Yvette Cooper: We regularly receive representations about the ethical aspects of fluoridation. We recognise the sincerity of people's concern and this is one of the reasons why we are proposing that decisions on fluoridation be taken locally. No new fluoridation scheme would be implemented unless there had been wide-ranging consultations, in which both opponents and supporters of fluoridation had had the opportunity to publicise their views and it had been demonstrated, through an objective assessment of public opinion, that a significant majority of people were in favour.

Mobile Telephone Masts

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish the conclusions of research into the possible harmful effects of transmissions from mobile telephone masts. [100897]

Yvette Cooper: The Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones, chaired by Sir William Stewart FRS FRSE, is currently considering the possible health effects from the use of mobile phones, base stations and transmitters and is conducting a comprehensive assessment of existing research. The group is expected to report in spring 2000.

Fireworks

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the estimated cost of accidents caused by fireworks to the National Health Service in each of the last five years. [100922]

Yvette Cooper: Figures for the cost to the National Health Service resulting from accidents caused by fireworks are not available. The number of attendances at accident and emergency departments due to firework injuries is collected annually, over a four week period covering Bonfire Night, by the Department of Trade and Industry through accident and emergency departments across England, Scotland and Wales. Figures for England in respect of the latest five years available are as follows:

Number of people requiring treatment for firework injuries at hospital accident and emergency departments in England [1]

	Number
1998	725
1997	803
1996	1,091
1995	1,359
1994	1,408

[1] Firework Injuries Data, Consumer Affairs Directorate, Department of Trade and Industry

School Diets

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce a national school fruit and vegetable scheme; and if he will make a statement. [100920]

Yvette Cooper: The White Paper "Saving Lives—Our Healthier Nation" recognised the importance of increasing fruit and vegetable consumption and we are currently considering a range of options on how to achieve this. It is one of the aims of the draft Regulations on National Nutritional Standards for School Lunches. A consultation document on these Regulations and accompanying guidance was published by the Department for Education and Employment last month, copies of which are available in the Library.

Stroke Units

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the contribution which *(a)* specialist stroke units and *(b)* conventional wards are making to the treatment of stroke sufferers. [100869]

Yvette Cooper: In October, the Royal College of Physicians published a report arising from the National Sentinel Audit of Stroke 1998, "Regional variations in stroke care". The Department, as part of the clinical effectiveness programme, funded this programme.

The New National Health Service and a First Class Service introduced a range of measures to raise quality and decrease unacceptable variations in service including the National Service Frameworks (NSFs). The NSF for

older people was announced last year. A number of task groups are supporting the External Reference Group for this NSF and one of these is looking at strokes. The NSF will be evidence based, and where this is not possible it will be based on the consensus of best clinical practice. Findings from the National Sentinel Audit have been made available to the External Reference Group on strokes.

MRSA

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to monitor *(a)* outbreaks of MRSA in NHS acute trusts and *(b)* how NHS trusts prevent and control the MRSA infection. [102843]

Yvette Cooper: Chief executives of National Health Service trusts are responsible for ensuring that there is an effective infection control programme within their trusts. Individual trusts manage arrangements for controlling hospital infection, including MRSA, in the light of local circumstances. This includes having an infection control team which has primary responsibility for all aspects of surveillance, prevention and control of hospital infection. The new risk management and organisational control standards for the NHS, which were launched on 22 November by my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Health, include standards for hospital infection control. These standards reinforce chief executives and trust board members' responsibilities. The Public Health Laboratory Service maintains a record of outbreaks of MRSA that are reported to it and publishes aggregated data at regular intervals.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much is being spent on research into the causes and elimination of MRSA in the current financial year. [102857]

Yvette Cooper: The Department is currently spending £91,000 on a systematic review of isolation policies and screening practices in MRSA management, which started in April 1999. In addition, the Medical Research Council (MRC), which receives most of its income via grant in aid from the office of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, funds medical research as part of the Government's funding of the science and engineering base. The MRC spent a total of £433,383 on research related to MRSA in 1998–99 and has also agreed funding for two new projects in this area for 2000–01, totalling approximately £91,260. The Staphylococcal Reference Unit at the PHLS Central Public Health Laboratory is also engaged in research, estimated to cost £40,000, on why some strains of MRSA are epidemic.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the estimated annual cost to the NHS of MRSA *(a)* in each of the last three financial years and *(b)* estimated for the current financial year; and how many NHS trusts in Kent are in financial difficulties as a result of MRSA. [102856]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not held centrally. In any individual patient, it is usually very difficult to assess the contribution of any infection acquired in hospital on the outcome, since many patients are already seriously ill from other conditions.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many NHS *(a)* beds and *(b)* wards are currently out of service due to MRSA; [102854]

(2) how many patients are currently in intensive care due to MRSA. [102855]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients died in 1997 and 1998 as a result of MRSA. [102858]

Yvette Cooper: Methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) infection can take the form of many different diseases from trivial skin infections to pneumonia or septicaemia. Often the causative micro-organism is not specified on the death certificate. MRSA does not have a distinct code within the International Classification of Diseases used for encoding death registration data at the Office for National Statistics. Consequently there are no centrally held statistics on deaths from this cause.

HIV Positive Babies

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many babies were born HIV positive in each year from 1989 to 1999 in *(a)* Shropshire and *(b)* England; and if he will make a statement. [102390]

Yvette Cooper: Between 1989 and 1999 there have been no reports of children with maternally acquired HIV infection born in Shropshire recorded in national surveillance data. The number of children with maternally acquired HIV infection reported in England as a whole is shown in the table. Also shown is the number of children for whom the reported infection status is indeterminate who were born to HIV infected mothers. This is high for recent years as it often cannot be established whether such a child is infected until it is eighteen months old.

There will be further HIV infected children born in England between 1989 and 1999 whose infection will be discovered only when they become ill.

Children born in England to HIV infected mothers by child's year of birth

Year of birth [1]	*Infection status*	*Infected*	*Indeterminate or lost to annual follow up*
1989	—	12	3
1990	—	38	7
1991	—	31	13
1992	—	46	11
1993	—	39	17
1994	—	37	15
1995	—	39	13
1996	—	34	20
1997	—	39	24
1998	—	22	43
1999[2]	—	6	98

[1] Numbers, particularly for recent years will rise as delayed reports are received.
[2] Reported by 31 October 1999.

Alcohol Abuse

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the *(a)* NHS and *(b)* Social Service budget for alcohol rehabilitation programmes in the current year. [102552]

Yvette Cooper: There are no specific allocations to either the National Health Service or social services for alcohol rehabilitation. Health authorities purchase substance misuse services from general Hospital and Community Health Service allocations. Local authorities purchase the majority of alcohol services from the generality of community care funding. Information on what the authorities spend on alcohol services from these allocations is not collected centrally. In addition, the Drug and Alcohol Specific Grant provides £1.78 million in 1999–2000 to develop local voluntary sector services for drugs and alcohol.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the estimated cost to the NHS of alcohol-related illness and accidents for each of the last five years. [102559]

Yvette Cooper: Estimates of the cost to the National Health Service of alcohol-related illnesses and injuries vary widely; the most recent academic estimate of which we are aware is for the costs of alcohol misuse in the NHS in England and Wales in 1992 and is reproduced in the table.

	£ million
Inpatient costs—direct alcohol diagnosis	40.8
Inpatient costs—other alcohol related diagnosis	120.2
General practice costs	3.1
Total	164.0

Source:
Health Education Authority: Health Update: Alcohol (1997)—after Godfrey, C and Hardman, G. (1994))

Drug Addiction Centres

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* the centres which are currently open for in-patient treatment for drug addiction within the NHS and *(b)* those that have closed in the last five years, with dates of closure. [102698]

Mr. Hutton: The 185 NHS Trusts in England that provided in-patient treatment for patients with a primary diagnosis of mental and behavioural disorders due to use of opioids—dependence syndrome (ICD10 F11.2), in 1997–98, are shown in the following list. Information is not available centrally on those that have closed in the last five years.

Addenbrooke's NHS Trust
Aintree Hospitals NHS Trust
Airedale NHS Trust
Avalon Somerset NHS Trust
Barnsley Community and Priority Services
Barnsley District General Hospital
Bassetlaw Hospital and Community Services
Bath Mental Health Care NHS Trust
Bedford and Shires Health and Care
Birmingham Heartlands and Solihull
Birmingham Women's Healthcare
Blackburn Hyndburn and Ribble Valley Health Care
Blackpool Victoria Hospital
Blackpool Wyre and Fylde Community Health Services
Bolton Hospitals NHS Trust
Bournewood Community and Mental Health Services
Bradford Community Health
Bradford Hospitals NHS Trust
Brighton Health Care NHS Trust
Burnley Healthcare NHS Trust
Bury Health Care NHS Trust
Calderdale Healthcare NHS Trust
Camden and Islington Community Health Service
Central Manchester Healthcare
Central Nottinghamshire Healthcare
Chesterfield and North Derbyshire Royal Hospital
Chorley and South Ribble NHS Trust
City and Hackney Community Services
City Hospital NHS Trust
City Hospitals Sunderland NHS
Community Healthcare: North Durham
Cornwall Healthcare NHS Trust
Countess Of Chester Hospital
Derbyshire Royal Infirmary
Dewsbury Health Care NHS Trust
Doncaster Healthcare NHS Trust
Doncaster Royal Infirmary and Montaqu Hospital
Dorset Community NHS Trust
Dorset Healthcare NHS Trust
Dudley Group of Hospitals NHS
Dudley Priority Health NHS Trust
East Cheshire NHS Trust
East Gloucestershire NHS Trust
East Hertfordshire NHS Trust
East Surrey Hospital and Community Healthcare
East Wiltshire Health Care
Eastbourne and County Healthcare
Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust
Exeter and District Community Health Services
Forest Healthcare NHS Trust
Frenchay Healthcare NHS Trust
Frimley Park Hospital NHS Trust
Greenwich Healthcare NHS Trust
Guys and St. Thomas's NHS Trust
Haringey Health Care NHS Trust
Harrogate Health Care NHS Trust
Hartlepool and East Durham NHS Trust
Hastings and Rother NHS Trust
Heathlands Mental Health
Herefordshire Community Health
Hinchingbrooke Healthcare
Hounslow and Spelthorne Community & Mental Health
Isle Of Wight Healthcare NHS Trust
James Paget Hospital NHS Trust
Kent and Canterbury Hospitals
Kings Lynn and Wisbech Hospitals
Kingston Hospital NHS Trust
Lambeth Health Care NHS Trust
Lancaster Priority Services
Leeds Community and Mental Health
Leicestershire Mental Health Service
Lincoln and Louth NHS Trust
Lincoln District Healthcare
Luton and Dunstable Hospital NHS

Mental Health Services of Salford
Mid Anglia Community Health
Mid Essex Community and Mental Health
Mid Essex Hospitals NHS Trust
Mid Sussex NHS Trust
Milton Keynes Community Health
Milton Keynes General Hospital
Norfolk and Norwich Health Care
North Durham Acute Hospitals
North East Essex Mental Health
North East Lincolnshire NHS Trust
North Hampshire Loddon Community
North Hertfordshire NHS Trust
North Kent Healthcare NHS Trust
North Lakeland Healthcare NHS Trust
North Manchester Healthcare
North Mersey Community NHS Trust
North Middlesex Hospital NHS Trust
North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare
North Staffordshire Hospital
North Tees Health NHS Trust
North West Anglia Healthcare
North West London Mental Health
Northallerton Health Services
Northampton Community Healthcare
Northern Birmingham Mental Health
Northern Devon Healthcare NHS
Northern General Hospital NHS
Northumberland Mental Health
Nottingham Healthcare NHS Trust
Nottingham University Hospital
Oldham NHS Trust
Oxleas NHS Trust
Pathfinder NHS Trust
Peterborough Hospitals NHS Trust
Pinderfields and Pontefract Hospitals
Plymouth Community Services
Portsmouth Healthcare NHS Trust
Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust
Preston Acute Hospitals NHS Trust
Priority Healthcare Wearside
Redbridge Health Care NHS Trust
Riverside Mental Health NHS Trust
Rochdale Healthcare NHS Trust
Rockingham Forest NHS Trust
Rotherham Priority Health
Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals
Royal Hull Hospitals NHS Trust
Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen Hospitals
Royal United Hospitals, Bath NHS
Salford Royal Hospitals NHS Trust
Salisbury Health Care NHS Trust
Scarborough and NE Yorkshire
Scunthorpe and Goole Hospitals
Scunthorpe Community Health Care
Severn NHS Trust
Sheffield Community Health Service
Shropshire's Mental Health NHS
Solihull Healthcare NHS Trust
South Bedfordshire Community Healthcare
South Birmingham Mental Health
South Buckinghamshire NHS Trust
South Cumbria Community and Mental Health
South Devon Healthcare NHS Trust
South Downs Health NHS Trust
South Durham NHS Trust
South Kent Community Healthcare
South Kent Hospitals NHS Trust
South Lincolnshire Community and Mental Health
South Manchester University Hospitals
South Tees Acute Hospitals NHS
South Warwickshire Mental Health Services
Southend Community Care Service
Southend Health Care NHS Trust
Southern Derbyshire Mental Health
Southmead Health Services NHS
Southport and Formby Hospitals
St. Helens and Knowsley Hospital
St. James's and Seacroft University Hospital
St. Mary's Hospital NHS Trust
Stockport Healthcare NHS Trust
Surrey Heartlands NHS Trust
Swindon and Marlborough NHS Trust
Tameside and Glossop Acute Services
Tameside and Glossop Community & Priority Services
The Bethlem and Maudsley NHS Trust
The Foundation NHS Trust
The Mid Cheshire Hospital NHS
The Princess Royal Hospital
The Royal Free Hampstead
The Royal Victoria Infirmary and Assoc Hospitals
The Royal Wolverhampton Hospital
The United Bristol Healthcare
Tower Hamlets Healthcare NHS Trust
Trafford Healthcare NHS Trust
United Leeds Teaching Hospitals
Wakefield and Pontefract Community
Walsall Community Health NHS Trust
Walsall Hospitals NHS Trust
Walsgrave Hospitals NHS Trust
West Berkshire Priority Care Services
West Cumbria Health Care NHS Trust
West Herts Community NHS Trust
West Lancashire NHS Trust
West London Healthcare NHS Trust
Weston Area Health NHS Trust
Wigan and Leigh Health Services
Wirral and West Cheshire Community
Wirral Hospital NHS Trust
Worcestershire Community Healthcare
York Health Services NHS Trust.

National Radiological Protection Board

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the membership of the governing committee of the National Radiological Protection Board and their registered interests; and if he will make a statement. [102601]

Yvette Cooper: The membership of the National Radiological Protection Board currently comprises:

Chairman

Sir Walter Bodmer FRS

Members

Professor A. D. Baddeley FRS

Professor Kay E. Davies CBE MA

Professor W. Gelletely

Professor J. M. Harrington CBE

Professor R. W. Lees

Professor Rona M. MacKie

Professor J. McEwen

Mr J. C. White.

All public bodies are required to maintain, and publish, registers of members' interests. The register of interests for members of the National Radiological Protection Board is available from the Board Secretary at the National Radiological Protection Board, Chilton, Didcot, Oxfordshire, OX11 0RQ. The register of interests will be available on NRPB's website [nrpb@nrpb.org.uk] in early 2000.

Cervix Removals

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many operations in which women have had a non-cancerous cervix removed there were in each of the past 10 years. [102593]

Yvette Cooper: The table shows the number of episodes where women have had an operation to remove a non-cancerous cervix, in National Health Service hospitals in England for the financial years 1989–90 to 1997–98.

Removal of non-cancerous cervix—NHS hospitals, England

	Number
1989–90	100
1990–91	97
1991–92	46
1992–93	59
1993–94	51
1994–95	37
1995–96	45
1996–97	47
1997–98[1]	45

[1] Figures for 1997–98 are provisional, no adjustments have yet been made for shortfalls in data, (i.e. the data is ungrossed).

Notes:

Ordinary admissions and day cases combined: completed episodes by primary operation (OPCS-4 code: Q01.1) and sex (females only)

1. 1989–90 to 1994–95 exclude FCEs with any of the following ICD-9 codes:

180-Malignant neoplasm of cervix uteri

219.0-Other benign neoplasm of uterus, cervix uteri

233.1-Carcinoma in situ of breast and genitourinary system, cervix uteri

236.0-Neoplasm of uncertain behaviour of genitourinary organs, uterus

239.5-Neoplasm of unspecified nature, other genitourinary organs

2. 1995–96 to 1997–98 exclude FCEs with any of the following ICD-10 codes:

C53-Malignant neoplasm of cervix uteri

C79.8-Secondary malignant neoplasm of other specified sites

D06-Carcinoma in situ of cervix uteri

D26.0-Other benign neoplasms of uterus, cervix uteri

D39.0-Neoplasm of uncertain or unknown behaviour of female genital organs, uterus

Source:

Department of Health, Hospital Episode Statistics (HES)

Peat

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his Department's policy is on the purchase and use of peat for its own operations and activities; and what performance targets his Department has set to reduce current peat use. [103012]

Yvette Cooper: There is no history of this Department having purchased or used peat for its own operations and activities, nor is there any expectation of the Department doing so in the future.

However, should the need ever arise, the Department proposes to substitute the use of all slow renewables, such as peat, with organic wastes (such as coir, manure, leaf mould and bark chippings) for improving the soil.

External Electrical Fields

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the studies carried out at Warwick University concerning the vulnerability of human beings to external electrical fields. [102862]

Yvette Cooper: Published research studies on the health effects of electromagnetic fields in general are regularly reviewed by the National Radiological Protection Board and its Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation.

The independent expert group on mobile phones, set up at the request of my right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), the former Minister for Public Health, is currently undertaking a rigorous assessment of biological and health research related to mobile phone systems. The group is expected to report in spring 2000.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of the microwave pulses used in mobile phone masts on the parts of the brains of children which are not stable until they reach the age of 12 years. [102860]

Yvette Cooper: The independent expert group on mobile phones, set up at the request of my right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Ms Jowell), the former Minister for Public Health, is currently undertaking a rigorous assessment of biological and health research associated with mobile phone systems. The group is expected to report in spring 2000.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will ensure that all contracts for the purchase of meat by NHS providers contain clauses specifying that the animals must have been reared under animal welfare conditions to a standard as high as those enforced in the UK. [103350]

Yvette Cooper: National Health Service Supplies contracts stipulate that the origin of meat purchased for consumption within the NHS must be disclosed. They do not contain clauses of the type to which the hon. Member refers. Nevertheless, meat supplied through NHS Supplies contracts is, wherever possible, sourced from the United Kingdom and does, therefore, comply with the new welfare regulations.

However, NHS trusts and health authorities have the freedom to buy goods and services from wherever provides the best value. Although most products are available from the UK, price considerations may lead health authorities and NHS trusts to buy from elsewhere in the European Union.

Transplant Services

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he intends to respond to the Royal College of Surgeons report on transplant services; and if he will make a statement; [103386]

(2) if he will estimate the cost of introducing a national transplant service; and if he will make a statement. [103387]

Mr. Denham: The Government intend to respond to the Royal College of Surgeons report on transplant services early in the New Year. We shall take account of the costs of options such as a National Transplant Service, along with other factors in formulating a response.

Aricept

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many health authorities *(a)* have authorised the prescription of the drug Aricept to ameliorate the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease in each of the Government standard regions, *(b)* have refused to authorise its use and *(c)* have not yet reached a decision. [103634]

Ms Stuart: Information about local policies on the treatment of Alzheimer's disease is not available centrally, but I understand that there is some prescribing of Aricept in all health authorities.

Aricept and other pharmaceutical treatment for Alzheimer's disease will be reviewed by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence as part of its first work programme. This work is expected to be completed by December 2000.

Antipsychotics

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to investigate the extent to which people with mental health problems are able to obtain atypical antipsychotics; and what steps the Government will take to ensure that people with mental illness have access to the drugs most likely to improve their quality of life. [103920]

Mr. Hutton: The prescribing of treatment for mental illness is a matter for clinicians. However, to assist clinicians in their decision making, an effective health care bulletin on drug treatments for schizophrenia has just been issued, copies of which are available in the Library. The Department has also commissioned the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the British Psychological Society to develop a guideline on this. The project is now being managed by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). NICE will take responsibility for considering any representations about the proposed recommendations and for ensuring that the final guidance to the NHS fairly reflects the needs of patients as well as the weight of evidence.

Mental Health

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Government plans to include in the proposed mental health Bill the principle of non-discrimination recommended by the Richardson Committee and the Disability Rights Taskforce. [103921]

Mr. Hutton: The recently published consultation paper on the reform of the Mental Health Act 1983, copies of which are available in the Library, makes clear that the Government recognise the importance of the principle of non-discrimination and agrees that specific guidance should be included in the Code of Practice accompanying new legislation. This approach is consistent with that taken by the Richardson Committee. Detailed issues to be covered in any future legislation will be considered following the end of the consultation period.

Paediatric Intensive Care

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many paediatric intensive care beds are available in each NHS region; and if he will list the hospitals at which they are provided, indicating the numbers in each case. [104031]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* The table shows hospitals within each National Health Service region providing paediatric intensive care in January 2000.

Hospitals providing paediatric intensive care beds

NHS Region	*Number of beds provided*
Trent region	
Leicester Royal Infirmary	8
Glenfield Hospital	5
Queens Medical Centre Nottingham	6
Sheffield Children's Hospital	7
London Region	
Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children	30
St. Mary's Hospital	8
Royal Brompton/Harefield NHS Trust	7
Guy's Hospital	16
Kings College Hospital	6
St. George's Hospital	5
Lewisham Hospital	3
South West Region	
United Bristol Healthcare Trust	16
Eastern Region	
Addenbrookes NHS Trust (Cambridge)	8
North West Region	
Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital (Alder Hey)	21
Manchester Children's Hospital	24
Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery	3
South East Region	
Southampton University Hospitals Trust	7
John Radcliffe Hospital (Oxford)	5
Royal Alexandra Hospital (Brighton)	1
West Midlands Region	
Birmingham Children's Hospital	18
North Staffordshire NHS Trust	8

Hospitals providing paediatric intensive care beds

NHS Region	*Number of beds provided*
Northern and Yorkshire Region	
Leeds General Infirmary	13
St. James' Hospital (Leeds)	2
Newcastle Hospitals NHS Trust	19
Hull Royal Infirmary	2
South Tees Hospital NHS Trust	5

Vulnerable Adults (Protection)

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will assess the benefits of providing vulnerable adults with the same protection as is given to vulnerable children. [104366]

Mr. Hutton: While the majority of adults are well looked after by their families and paid carers, research has shown that abuse of vulnerable adults is nevertheless widespread. The protection of vulnerable adults who are at risk of abuse is therefore vital, and is a major concern of the Government.

In recent years the Department has funded a national helpline, run by Action on Elder Abuse, which enables people to seek advice on how to deal with incidents of abuse. The Department also has funded the production of training materials aimed at helping managers and care staff in residential care settings for older people better to understand the types and causes of abuse of their residents, how to expose abuse, and how to prevent it happening in the first place.

Currently, the Department is leading the work on producing guidance for developing multi-agency codes of practice for dealing with abuse of vulnerable adults. The consultation period of the draft guidance has now ended, and the final document titled "No Secrets" will be published shortly.

To offer further protection to vulnerable adults at risk of abuse, the Care Standards Bill, now in another place, contains provisions for a statutory work force ban mechanism to parallel that in the Protection of Children Act 1999.

Food Standards Agency

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the members of the Food Standards Agency appointed to date; and what criteria were used for their appointment. [100788]

Mr. Milburn: The selection process for the Board members of the Food Standards Agency has not yet been completed. However, I am pleased to be able to announce today that I have appointed Professor Sir John Krebs as the Chairman of the Agency. Sir John is a Royal Society Research Professor in the Department of Zoology, Oxford University and was formerly Chief Executive of the Natural Environment Research Council.

Sir John's Deputy will be Ms Suzi Leather, currently chair of Exeter and District Community NHS Trust. Ms Leather has twenty years of experience in consumer representation. The Chief Executive of the Agency will be Mr. Geoffrey Podger, who is currently Head of the Joint Food Safety and Standards Group (of the Department of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), forerunner to the Agency.

The names of the Agency's Scottish Board member and Welsh Board member are the subject of further announcements today by my colleagues in Scotland and Wales. We hope to be able to announce the names of other Board members of the Agency in the near future.

The approach adopted—as we said in the White Paper "A Force for Change"—has been that people should be appointed who have a proven record in relevant fields and who together provide a balance of relevant skills and experience. A majority of those appointed will come from a wider public interest background without any specific affiliation.

CABINET OFFICE

British-Irish Council

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the recent meeting of the British-Irish Council. [103441]

Marjorie Mowlam: The inaugural summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, established under the Good Friday Agreement, was held at Lancaster House, London on Friday 17 December 1999.

The role of the Council is to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands. It will exchange information, discuss and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of the relevant Administrations.

At its inaugural meeting the Council agreed a Memorandum on its working procedures. It adopted an initial list of issues for early discussion in the BIC and also decided which administrations would take the lead in each sectoral area:

Topic	*Lead Administration*
Drugs	Irish Government
Social Inclusion	Scottish Executive and Cabinet of National Assembly for Wales
Environment	British Government
Transport	Northern Ireland Executive Committee
Knowledge Economy	Jersey

In addition, the Council agreed an indicative list of other issues suitable for the Council's work, including areas which members are already taking forward bilaterally:

agricultural issues such as plant quarantine; rural development and rural depopulation; the development of renewable raw materials and energy crops; salmon fisheries; sea fisheries and aquaculture;

health issues;

regional issues: including links between cities, towns and local districts;

consideration of interparliamentary links (noting paragraph 11 of the Memorandum on Procedural Guidance);

energy issues;

cultural issues;

tourism;

sporting activity;

education issues;

approaches to EU issues;

minority and lesser-used languages;

prison and probation issues.

The next summit meeting of the Council will take place in Dublin in June 2000 and will focus on the issue of drugs.

TREASURY

Labour Statistics

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) at what rate 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed for over six months left the unemployment count in March 1998; [102110]

(2) if he will provide a breakdown of the average monthly rate at which 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed for over six months left the unemployment count for each year from 1990 to 1999; [102112]

(3) what has been the average monthly rate at which 18 to 24-year-olds unemployed for over six months have left the unemployment count since April 1998. [102111]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answers 9 December 1999]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. John Bercow, dated 12 January 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary questions on the average monthly rate at which 18–24 year olds left the unemployment count.

The ONS publishes a monthly count of claimants of unemployment-related benefits. The claimant count consists of all people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or National Insurance credits at Employment Service local offices. They must declare that they are out of work, capable of, available for and actively seeking work during the week in which the claim is made.

An average of 22.4 per cent. of people aged 18–24 years who were claiming unemployment-related benefits for six months or more (computerised claims only) left the claimant count each month in the United Kingdom between April 1998 and October 1999.

The corresponding percentage between 12 March 1998 and 9 April 1998, was 14.0 per cent.

The available information for 1990 to 1999 is given in the following table.

18–24 year old claimants unemployed 6 months or more who left the count as a percentage of all 18–24 year olds claiming for six months or more, United Kingdom; yearly averages from 1990 to 1999

Year	*Age 18–24*
1990	13.1
1991	9.8
1992	9.3
1993	9.9
1994	10.9
1995	11.3
1996	12.2
1997	15.0
1998	17.8
1999[1]	27.1

[1] Average of the 10 months January to October 1999

Debt Relief

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the criteria which will be used to determine which countries, and which categories of debt, will be eligible for 100 per cent. relief. [103176]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government's commitment to lifting 100 per cent. of the burden of debt owed to the Export Credit Guarantee Department covers all categories of debt owed by the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries, a group of 41 developing countries. All are Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility or International Development Association-only and face unsustainable debt burden even after traditional debt-relief mechanisms have been applied fully.

Outsourced Operations

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what mechanisms are used to assess how much extra contract work outsourced operations will need to take on; and how the viability of plans to generate this extra work is assessed; [103625]

(2) what measures of added value are currently used when assessing outsourcing plans in terms of *(a)* technology and *(b)* procedure; [103629]

(3) what measures of added value when assessing the benefits of outsourcing were used between 1994–97; and what additional measures have been included in the assessment of outsourcing plans since 1997. [103630]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Under the Better Quality Services programme, Departments and other central Government bodies have plans to review their activities against five systems: abolition; privatisation; marketing testing; strategic contracting out; and internal restructuring.

Reviews follow procedures Set out in the Better Quality Services handbook, published in 1998, which emphasis the need for consultation with stakeholders. Individual reviews should result in added value through improvements in service cost and quality.

Where a decision to outsource is taken, Government procurement policy requires that to be based on value for money, which is the optimum combination of whole life cost and quality to meet the user's requirement. Under the procurement process, bidders are selected on their financial or economic standing and technical capacity and capability, and contracts are awarded on the basis of value for money. This includes consideration of the added value offered by a particular bid or through award of a particular contract.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Food Standards Agency

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will make a statement on the appointment of members of the Food Standards Agency; [100200]

(2) if he will list the members of the Food Standards Agency and the areas of expertise from which they have been drawn; [100201]

(3) which members of the Food Standards Agency who have been appointed on the basis of their membership of organisations representing *(a)* victims and *(b)* families of victims of E. coli 0157 poisoning. [100202]

Mr. Milburn: I have been asked to reply.

The selection process for the Board members of the Food Standards Agency has not yet been completed. However, I am pleased to be able to announce today that I have appointed Professor Sir John Krebs as the Chairman of the Agency. Sir John is a Royal Society Research Professor in the Department of Zoology, Oxford University and was formerly Chief Executive of the Natural Environment Research Council.

Sir John's Deputy will be Ms Suzi Leather, currently chair of Exeter and District Community NHS Trust. Ms Leather has twenty years of experience in consumer representation. The Chief Executive of the Agency will be Mr. Geoffrey Podger, who is currently Head of the Joint Food Safety and Standards Group (of the Department of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), forerunner to the Agency.

The names of the Agency's Scottish Board member and Welsh Board member are the subject of further announcements today by my colleagues in Scotland and Wales. We hope to be able to announce the names of other Board members of the Agency in the near future.

The approach adopted—as we said in the White Paper "A Force for Change"—has been that people should be appointed who have a proven record in relevant fields and who together provide a balance of relevant skills and experience. A majority of those appointed will come from a wider public interest background without any specific affiliation.

Beef Slaughter Premium Scheme

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the new beef slaughter premium scheme will be implemented; and from what date payments will be available. [103903]

Ms Quin: The new slaughter premium will be payable on cattle slaughtered on or after 1 January 2000. A 60 per cent. advance of the payments due, in respect of animals slaughtered in the year 2000, will be made as soon as possible after 16 October 2000, with the balance paid as soon as possible after 1 April 2001. This is identical to the payment timetable for the existing Beef Special Premium and Suckler Cow Premium Schemes.

Organophosphates

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to discuss the report of the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment on organophosphates with the *(a)* Ministry of Defence, *(b)* Department of Health and *(c)* Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. [103232]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The Committee's report on organophosphates (OPs) has been discussed by the Official Group on OPs, which brings together representatives from all the key departments and agencies with an interest in this area (including the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Health and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions).

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research on organophosphates his Department plans to carry out with relevance to Gulf War syndrome. [103089]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* The Ministry of Defence has responsibility for research in respect of Gulf veterans' illnesses. They continue to monitor research on OPs, including that funded by MAFF, in view of the suggested link between Gulf veterans' illnesses and OP pesticides.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the effects of sheep-dips on farmers' health. [103090]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 20 December 1999]:* I refer my hon. Friend to my reply of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 446W, to his question on the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment report on organophosphates.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104029]

Mr. Morley: The figures requested for 1999 are set out in the table. These are expressed as Full Time Equivalents. A comparable split by age group is not available for 1979.

Age	*Female*	*Male*	*Total*
	Full Time Equivalents		*Full Time Equivalents*
Core MAFF			
16–19	108.64	54.55	163.19
20–24	349.47	284.91	634.38
25–29	476.50	432.64	909.14
30–34	462.72	459.19	921.91
35–39	452.50	446.19	898.69
40–44	369.26	444.55	813.81
45–49	344.77	456.29	801.07
50–54	362.12	495.93	858.05
55–59	237.07	323.57	560.64
60–75	83.95	95.19	179.14
Total Full Time Equivalents	3,246.98	3,493.02	6,740.00

Age	Female	Male	Total Full Time Equivalents
	Full Time Equivalents		
MAFF Agencies			
16–19	28.00	12.65	40.65
20–24	162.62	144.42	307.04
25–29	303.96	350.15	654.11
30–34	317.82	456.36	774.18
35–39	236.17	433.77	669.94
40–44	190.27	404.82	595.09
45–49	180.21	334.30	514.50
50–54	173.97	377.58	551.55
55–59	118.94	231.83	350.77
60–75	37.27	35.43	72.70
Total Full Time Equivalents	1,749.22	2,781.31	4,530.53

In 1979 there were 7,498 men and 5,639.5 women working in MAFF.

European Regional Funds

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what level of match public funds from his Department is available to EU Objective 1 regions for each of the next seven calendar years; [104304]

(2) what assessment he has made of the requirements for match public funds from his Department for the EU Objective 1 regions of *(a)* Cornwall and Scilly, *(b)* Merseyside and *(c)* South Yorkshire for each of the seven years of the programme. [104300]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* It is the responsibility of grant applicants in the Objective 1 regions to calculate how much match public funding they will need and from where they should obtain this. The Government have provided and will continue to provide significant financial support through a variety of programmes sponsored by different departments. MAFF is currently considering its contribution to this support. Local partnerships can prioritise the use of these resources to fund projects jointly with the Structural Funds.

Regional partners can also seek to match their European funds with contributions from the voluntary and private sectors, as well as through loans from organisations such as the European Investment Bank.

GM Crops

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which GM crops are currently being tested. [104288]

Mr. Meacher: I have been asked to reply.

The crops being tested in the field scale trials are fodder maize and oilseed rape which have been genetically modified to be herbicide tolerant. One variety of fodder maize and one variety each of spring-sown and autumn-sown oilseed rape are being tested to provide a thorough evaluation of their environmental impact. All results of the tests will be made publicly available.

In addition, there are a number of crops being grown for smaller-scale research purposes. The crops currently being tested are spring and winter oilseed rape, sugar and fodder beet, wheat, potato, maize, poplar and chicory.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 13 January 2000

DEFENCE

Falklands Conflict

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel who served in the Falklands conflict originated from Northern Ireland; and in which *(a)* regiments and *(b)* other parts of the services they served. [104394]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence does not hold a centrally collated record of the origins of servicemen and their individual deployments that contains the information requested for all three Services. Full details could be provided only at disproportionate cost, following detailed examination of individual records.

However I can advise that available data show that some 95 Army and 29 RAF individuals who served in the Falklands operations are recorded as having originated from Northern Ireland and I will write with further details concerning regiments and units in which they served.

Defence Vetting Agency

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 468W, concerning the move of the Defence Vetting Agency to York, if he will estimate the number of people living within 50 miles of York who will be working at the Defence Vetting Agency. [104667]

Mr. Spellar: The Agency is in the early stages of forming up at York. It will be taking on staff (mainly from HQ 2nd Division but also through local recruitment) at various points between now and early 2001, when the Agency will reach its full strength at York of 181. Many posts are still unfilled.

It is expected that all permanent staff working for the Agency at Imphal Barracks in the eventual workforce will live locally and commute daily. It is not our normal practice to check on the distance that individuals commute, but a random survey suggests that the overwhelming majority of our York-based workforce will live within 50 miles of York.

In my earlier answer I explained that, in addition to the 181 DVA staff who will be based at Imphal Barracks, the Agency would employ 130 Investigating Officers who would work from their homes. The location of these Officers is tied to the major areas of MOD employment across the UK. The Officers are tasked from, and report to the Agency at York, but will very rarely travel there.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the outcome of the feasibility study into compulsory mobilisation of the Territorial Army to sustain peace support operations in the Balkans. [105415]

Mr. Spellar: The Feasibility Study has concluded that compulsory mobilisation is feasible in both legal and practical terms. This will enable the TA to make a major contribution to front-line operations and reflects and supports the intent of the Strategic Defence Review that the Territorial Army should be usable. At the same time, as a result of the reduction in UK force levels in the Balkans, we judge that compulsory mobilisation is not operationally necessary at this time. We will keep the possibility of compulsory mobilisation under constant review in the light of the prevailing operational conditions.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Regional Aid

Mr. Ashton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what reasons underlie the policy of referring applications to his Department for regional aid or assistance to the Minister of Agriculture. [104173]

Ms Hewitt: The Department asks the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for advice on all Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) applications with an agriculture element to ensure that there are no EC restrictions on projects being eligible for assistance in this respect. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is responsible for decisions taken on awards of RSA.

Correspondence

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed of 9 August to the Minister of State about the inclusion of postcodes in telephone directories. [104094]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* I replied to the right hon. Member yesterday.

IPPC Charges

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the level of IPPC charges in other EU member states; and if he will make a statement. [104101]

Ms Hewitt: The system of IPPC charges, which is still under consideration, is the responsibility of the Environment Agency. The Agency consulted on an interim charging regime last autumn, and is considering the outcome of that consultation. The Agency will be monitoring the implementation of IPPC in other member states including their charging policies.

Minimum Wage

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects the review of the current minimum wage to be completed. [104688]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government received the Low Pay Commission's Report on the impact of implementation of the national minimum wage at the end of December. Once Ministers have had an opportunity to consider the Report's findings, both the Report and the Government's response to it will be published.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Philippines

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to put contracts for the Government of the Philippines Bridge Replacement Project under the existing offer of aid and trade provision out to tender in the United Kingdom. [104034]

Clare Short: The first component of the Philippines Bridge Replacement Programme, for emergency steel panel bridging, was negotiated with the Mabey Group and is due to be completed shortly. The second component is for various types of steel bridging and a range of design and advisory services. This is being negotiated with a consortium of Balfour Kilpatrick and Cleveland Bridge.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Old Vehicles

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* cars and *(b)* motor-cycles which are more than 25 years old are in use in the United Kingdom. [103155]

Mr. Hill: The number of vehicles more than 25 years old at the end of 1998 in Great Britain was as follows:

Cars: 256,392 (1.1 per cent. of licensed stock)

Motor Cycles: 91,173 (11.2 per cent. of licensed stock)

At present, we do not have this information for Northern Ireland.

Concessionary Travel

Mr. Martin Bell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what account he will take of the European Court of Justice judgment on 15 December, in amending his policy on permitting local authorities to grant local travel concessions to men aged over 60 years. [104150]

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to equalise at the age of 60 the eligibility for the minimum half price local bus concession for older people following the judgment in the case of John Taylor and Liberty *v.* HM Government. [104057]

Mr. Hill: Legal advice is that this judgment does not have implications for concessionary fares on local transport.

Road Accidents

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the accident rates including fatalities for *(a)* single and *(b)* dual carriageway roads. [104116]

Mr. Hill: Accident rates on single and dual carriageway roads are given in the table.

Accident rates for single and dual carriageway roads in Great Britain: 1998

Accident rate per hundred million vehicle kms

	Single carriageway	*Dual carriageway*[1]	*All roads*[2]
Fatal	0.8	0.4	0.7
Fatal and Serious Accidents	9.9	4.0	8.2
All Personal Injury Accidents	59	27	52

[1] Includes motorways

[2] Includes accidents at roundabouts and those where carriageway type is unknown

Driving Licences

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what published standards are set for the Driver and Vehicle Licence Agency on the time taken to process driving licence applications that include reference to a medical condition; and what standards in respect of such applications the Agency has achieved in the last three quarters of 1999. [104056]

Mr. Hill: The service standards for applications involving a medical investigation are published in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's Service Guide. This states that the Agency's Medical Unit aims to complete its investigations:

(a) within five weeks of receiving an application for a car or motorcycle licence;

(b) within seven weeks of receiving an application for a large goods/passenger carrying vehicle licence.

When medical investigations take longer than this, applicants are advised on an individual basis.

Excluding December, where final figures have yet to be available, in the last three-quarters of 1999 the Agency achieved an average performance of 44 per cent. of car and motorcycle applications and 66 per cent. of large goods and passenger carrying vehicles being processed within the published standard.

Action is being taken to bring this service up to standard and the position is steadily improving.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the average time between applying for and receiving *(a)* a driving licence and *(b)* a driving licence that includes reference to a medical condition. [104055]

Mr. Hill: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency undertakes to issue driving licences and return original documents to customers within three weeks (15 working days) of the date of receipt of their applications. This three-week standard has been met or bettered consistently throughout the year.

In cases where a driver declares a medical condition—amounting to some 1,100 applications a day—because of the increased complexities of the service the standard is five weeks for a car licence and seven weeks for a bus or lorry licence. Some current cases in these categories are taking longer. Action is being taken to bring this service up to standard and the position is steadily improving.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what published standards are set for the Driver and Vehicle Licence Agency on the time taken to process driving licence applications; and what standards in processing applications the Agency has achieved in the last three quarters of 1999. [104054]

Mr. Hill: Where there are no medical considerations, DVLA undertakes to issue driving licences (and return original identity documents) to customers within three weeks (15 working days) of the date of receipt of their applications. This standard is set out in the Agency's Customer Service Guide. This three-week standard has been met or bettered consistently throughout the last three-quarters of 1999.

Trunk Roads (West Sussex)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will next announce approval for trunk road improvement schemes or new by-passes in West Sussex. [104275]

Mr. Hill: "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England" set out our investment priorities and a programme of studies to consider problems on the trunk road network. Among the studies is one on the problems of congestion between Worthing and Lancing on the A27. It is considering specific local problems within the area to be covered by the wider study, to commence later this year, looking at congestion, safety and environmental problems between Southampton and Folkestone. In the light of the findings of these studies, it will be for the Regional Planning Body to consider whether to recommend to the Secretary of State any trunk road improvement schemes as part of their regional transport strategy.

Airport Traffic

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list in order of air traffic movements over the last five years the airport traffic at *(a)* Heathrow, *(b)* Gatwick, *(c)* Luton, *(d)* Exeter and *(e)* Guernsey. [104595]

Mr. Mullin: The last five full years for which air traffic movements data are available are 1994 to 1998 inclusive. The air traffic movements over these years at Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton, Exeter and Guernsey are listed in the table.

	1998	*1997*	*1996*	*1995*	*1994*
Heathrow	442,412	430,706	428,342	421,289	411,608
Gatwick	242,547	229,665	211,686	192,806	181,879
Luton	47,748	40,287	31,029	21,716	17,161
Guernsey	40,085	39,625	40,632	40,902	39,850
Exeter	8,608	7,877	7,870	8,844	10,198

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the future use of the Dome site. [104438]

Ms Armstrong: The Government launched a competition last year for the long-term use of the Dome after the Millennium Experience. The short list of bidders will be announced shortly.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the financial value of the Dome site. [104437]

Ms Armstrong: The Dome site is on offer as part of the assets available in the Government competition to find a long-term, financially viable and sustainable use for the Millennium Dome. The Government estimate of the financial value of the Dome site is restricted as commercial-in-confidence.

Lindane

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps his Department takes to monitor the effects of lindane. [104610]

Mr. Mullin: The Department funds the monitoring of chemicals, including lindane, in air and the marine environment and the Environment Agency also monitors for lindane in marine and fresh waters. The effects of pesticides on wildlife and companion animals are monitored by MAFF's Wildlife Incidents Investigation Scheme.

Newly Qualified Drivers

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the Government have to introduce regulations to compel newly qualified drivers to display warnings on the vehicle they are driving that they are newly qualified. [104448]

Mr. Hill: A number of safety improvements for learners and new drivers, including this one, are being considered as part of the Road Safety Strategy which is to be announced shortly.

GM Crops

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to authorise further field-scale trials of genetically modified crops. [103775]

Mr. Meacher: I announced a renewed voluntary agreement with industry on the conduct of the farm scale evaluation programme on 5 November 1999. Under the agreement, plantings for the farm scale GM crop evaluations are limited to 20–25 fields per crop per year, subject to the advice and requirements of the independent Scientific Steering Committee overseeing the programme. This covers the plantings through to 2002 for the crops in the programme—GM fodder maize, and spring and winter oilseed rape, all modified to be tolerant to a herbicide. Subject to the advice of the Scientific Steering Committee, a fourth crop, beet modified to be tolerant to

a herbicide, may be included in the programme for the same three years. Proposals for any other field scale plantings of these crops during the farm scale evaluation period will be decided by the Scientific Steering Committee, taking into account the relevance of the proposals to biodiversity.

Countryside (Access)

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of the Government's Access to the Countryside proposals. [103779]

Mr. Mullin: The Government's proposals to improve public access to the countryside will be included in the Countryside Bill, announced in last year's Queen's Speech. The Bill will also include measures for improving rights of way. The access provisions of the Bill (which we expect to be introduced into Parliament shortly) will build on the proposals set out in "The Government's Framework for Action, Access to the Countryside in England and Wales", issued in March last year.

Planning Regulations

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact on farming of local planning regulations in *(a)* Gloucestershire and *(b)* the South West. [103790]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Development control policies, and their impact upon any particular sectoral interest, are matters for the local planning authorities concerned, as set down in their development plans and having regard to national and regional planning policy guidance.

Driving Agencies

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the report prepared by the Audit Commission on the DVLA and DSA; and what action he intends to take as a result of this report. [104645]

Mr. Hill: I understand that the Public Services Productivity Panel intend to publish this report shortly.

Home Improvement Agencies

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to appoint a national co-ordinating body for home improvement agencies in England to serve from 1 April 2000. [105137]

Mr. Raynsford: I have invited Collective Enterprises Limited to enter into post-tender negotiations with the Department. Subject to the satisfactory completion of these negotiations, I expect to award them a contract to act as the national co-ordinating body for Home Improvement Agencies in England for four years from 1 April 2000.

The Department invited Care and Repair England Limited (the current national co-ordinating body) and Collective Enterprises Limited to submit tenders. Both offered a comprehensive range of services. However, Care and Repair England's tender was substantially more expensive and I believe that Collective Enterprises Limited offer significantly better value for money. I look forward to working with them to build on the foundations which have been laid.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Public Safety Radio Communications Service

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made towards the agreement of a contract for the Public Safety Radio Communications Service; and if he will make a statement. [105317]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Chief Executive of the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO) issued a letter of instruction to proceed to British Telecom plc before Christmas, authorising them to invest in the project infrastructure. Negotiations on the Framework Arrangement and the model service contract are continuing and I hope they will be concluded by the end of January. PITO will be asking individual police authorities to sign service contracts by the end of February.

CCTV Tenders

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for announcing the results of the current round of CCTV bids. [105319]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am planning to make an announcement on Monday 17 January.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103850]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office has a Public Service Agreement commitment to deliver 3 per cent. per annum running cost productivity gains, and is currently on target to deliver this for 1999–2000.

A joint Home Office and Her Majesty's Treasury ministerial review of productivity is to be led by both the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my noble Friend, Lord Bassam of Brighton and the Financial Secretary to Her Majesty's Treasury and is intended to focus on four key areas:

Personnel Management;
Information Technology;
The Home Office Estate; and
Procurement Planning.

Asylum Seekers (Algeria)

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many asylum applications, made by Algerians, have been decided by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each of the last three months; [104371]

(2) how many asylum applications, made by Algerians, have been decided by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each of the last three months, where the applicant has been in detention; [104372]

(3) how many asylum applications have been made by Algerians in the last three months. [104374]

Mrs. Roche: The available information is that in September 1999, 135 nationals of Algeria, excluding dependants, applied for asylum in the United Kingdom. This figure fell slightly to 115 in October and 90 in November.

Information on how many asylum applications, made by Algerians, have been decided by the Immigration and Nationality Directorate in each of the last three months is not currently available.

Information on Algerian asylum seekers who have had a decision and who had been detained at some point could be obtained only at disproportionate cost through the examination of individual case records.

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Algerians have been *(a)* removed and *(b)* deported in each of the last three months; and what proportion of these had previously claimed asylum. [104373]

Mrs. Roche: The latest available information relates to arriving passengers during the period April-June 1999. Thirty-eight Algerian passengers were refused leave to enter and removed from the United Kingdom in April 1999, 28 in May 1999 and 21 in June 1999. Those data are provisional and do not show whether or not the person concerned had claimed asylum. This additional information could be obtained only by examining the individual case files.

Data for Algerian nationals removed or departing voluntarily under illegal entry or deportation procedures during this period are not yet available.

Konrad Kalejs

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assistance will be given to the Australian law enforcement authorities in their inquiries into the case of Konrad Kalejs. [104514]

Mr. Straw: We have made it clear to the Australian authorities that any relevant details they sought would be made available to them, including those details held by the Metropolitan Police.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the case of Konrad Kalejs. [104513]

Mr. Straw: I issued a full statement on 6 January. I have placed copies of the statement in the Library and am sending my hon. Friend a copy.

Electoral Register

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received from the Direct Marketing Association on commercial and charity use of the electoral register; and what response he has given. [104646]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Since the publication of the summary of recommendations of the Working Party on Electoral Procedures on 13 July 1999, Home Office Ministers have received two written representations from the Direct Marketing Association, dated 23 September and 22 November. In response to the first of these, I held a meeting with representatives of the Association on 9 November for a full discussion of the issues that concerned them. Following consideration of the second letter, I wrote to the Association on 12 January 2000.

Probation Service

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce the Private Finance Initiative into the future development of the Probation Estate in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [104742]

Mr. Boateng: No decisions have been taken about the future financing of the Probation Estate in England and Wales as a whole and a range of options, including the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), will be considered in due course. Local PFI initiatives are currently being considered for probation services in Mid Glamorgan, Avon and Essex.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to centralise the Probation Estate; and if he will make a statement. [104741]

Mr. Boateng: The plan to centralise the Probation Estate will be developed as part of the arrangements to modernise the Probation Service in England and Wales. Details are not yet available.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to out-source clerical and administrative support for the Probation Service in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [104740]

Mr. Boateng: I have no current plans for out-sourcing this work.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the report commissioned by his Department into the case for the centralisation of the Probation Service estate in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [104744]

Mr. Boateng: The decision to centralise ownership and management of the Probation Service estate was not dependent on the survey of the Probation Service estate, a copy of the report on which will be placed in the Library in due course.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce a revised case recording and management system for the Probation Service in England and Wales; and if he will make a statement. [104743]

Mr. Boateng: A project is currently under way to redevelop the current case recording and management system for the Probation Services for England and Wales, involving representatives of these Services. A project board has been established; a user requirement has been produced and a specialist Information Technology project manager has been recruited.

Involuntary Manslaughter

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations his Department

has received on his plans to propose legislation on the Law Commission's recommendation of an offence of involuntary manslaughter. [103801]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have received written representations from hon. Members, interested groups and members of the public about the Government's response to the Law Commission's report "Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter". The issue has also been raised in a number of parliamentary Questions.

We are currently considering the recommendations of the interdepartmental working group which has been considering the Law Commission's report and will consult our colleagues shortly.

Access Arrangements

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many court welfare officers in England and Wales received training in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998 to deal with access arrangements for children following separation and divorce; [104396]

(2) what training courses exist for court welfare officers to deal with the problem of parental alienation. [104397]

Mr. Boateng: The comprehensive induction programme for family court welfare officers includes modules on working with children and separating families. Available records indicate that 75 people completed the whole programme in the period April 1997 to March 1998, and 50 in the period April 1998 to March 1999. The need for any additional training is assessed by individual probation services and provided by either the service itself or an external agent. No information is collected centrally on this additional training.

Sudbury Prison

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate *(a)* the percentage of prisoners who were serving a life sentence and *(b)* the number of prisoners in Sudbury Prison at six-monthly intervals over the last 10 years. [104644]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available provisional information for life sentence prisoners is for 30 November 1999. On that date, 7 per cent. of the prison population in England and Wales were life sentence prisoners. Information on the population of Sudbury prison over the last 10 years is given in the table.

Population in Her Majesty's Prison Sudbury 1989–99

Date	*Number*
1989	
30 June	537
31 December	518
1990	
30 June	524
31 December	464
1991	
30 June	534
31 December	436
1992	
30 June	450
31 December	402
1993	
30 June	455
31 December	406
1994	
30 June	441
31 December	401
1995	
30 June	387
31 December	377
1996	
30 June	474
31 December	456
1997	
30 June	504
31 December	462
1998	
30 June	493
31 December	488
1999	
30 June	499
30 November[1]	505

[1] Latest available

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

CPS

31. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Solicitor-General what recent assessment he has made of the record of the Crown Prosecution Service in bringing persistent young offenders to trial in Merseyside. [103806]

The Solicitor-General: During my visit to CPS Merseyside in September last year, I was able to see at first hand the efforts made by the CPS and other local agencies to reduce the time it took to prosecute persistent young offenders. The average time taken from arrest to sentence is steadily decreasing, and the Area anticipates further significant reductions as a result of fast tracking arrangements that are being adopted throughout Merseyside.

33. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the Commission for Racial Equality's investigation into the Crown Prosecution Service. [103808]

The Solicitor-General: The Crown Prosecution Service is in discussion with the CRE regarding the proposed investigation and hopes to find an agreed way forward. The CRE will reach a conclusion and notify the CPS before the end of January 2000.

34. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the Solicitor-General what progress he has made in ensuring greater effectiveness in the application of information technology within the Crown Prosecution Service. [103809]

The Solicitor-General: I am pleased to report that significant progress has been made in developing effective IT in CPS.

The Review of the CPS led by Sir Iain Glidewell reported in June 1998. It recommended the creation of a new post, Director of Business and Information Systems. That post has been filled and an Information Systems Strategic Plan developed. This plan provides a two-step approach to delivering effective IT support to lawyers and caseworkers, as well as that needed for effective administration and control.

In July 1999, the CPS was awarded £12 million from the Government's Capital Modernisation Fund. This money together with existing CPS resources will fund Step 1, the Connect 42 project. This will provide access for lawyers and caseworkers to networked PCs across the 42 CPS Areas. It will also enable secure electronic mail connections with its partners in the Criminal Justice System.

Step 2 of the Modernisation Programme, the Compass project, is procuring a Managed Service through a PFI contract. This will use the IT infrastructure of Step 1, and complement it with a case management system designed to meet the needs of front line CPS staff. It will provide the ability to work with electronic case files and allow information to be exchanged much more easily with other organisations in the criminal justice system through speedier electronic communications between computer systems.

Piloting of the Connect 42 project is planned for March 2000, with national rollout following over the subsequent 18 months.

The CPS plans to advertise its requirement for the Compass project in the *Official Journal for the European Communities* in second quarter of 2000.

35. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the rights of audience exercised by Crown Prosecution Service lawyers in the higher courts. [103810]

The Solicitor-General: In February 1997 limited rights of audience were granted to employed solicitors, allowing them to appear alone in appeals and uncontested cases in the Crown Court or to act as juniors in cases in which leading counsel are instructed. CPS higher court advocates began to exercise those rights in August 1998, since then the volume of work undertaken by them has gradually increased.

The impression that the Attorney-General and I have gained from our visits to various parts of the country is that the higher court advocates have been well received by judges and the Bar.

By mid-2000 nearly 200 CPS solicitor higher court advocates will have been trained. The CPS is now considering its future strategy for deploying its lawyers in the Crown Court in the light of the Access to Justice Act 1999, which grants full rights of audience to all lawyers.

Serious Fraud Office

32. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the recent performance of the Serious Fraud Office. [103807]

The Solicitor-General: In 1998–99, the Serious Fraud Office obtained 34 convictions from the 42 defendants tried. The SFO continues to be an effective deterrent against serious and complex fraud.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Football Task Force

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which members of the Football Task Force supported the majority report on commercial issues. [104444]

Kate Hoey: The Football Task Force did not vote on any issue during its deliberations and all members of the Task Force signed up to the report in its published form. The particular views of individual members of the Task Force on particular parts of the report on commercial issues are therefore not known.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Libya

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the British Ambassador's discussions with the Libyan authorities concerning the alleged discovery of parts for Scud missiles at a British airport. [104450]

Mr. Hain: The British Ambassador in Tripoli called on the Libyan Foreign Ministry on 10 January to protest about the Libyans' attempt to import missile parts via the UK. The Libyans took note of our serious concerns.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what grounds the UN Sanctions Committee banned the import of bulls to Iraq; and if he will make a statement. [104421]

Mr. Hain: An application to import 15 bulls to Iraq was made to the UN Sanctions Committee in late November. The Committee had no objection to the import of the bulls. However, the application also included the supply of a number of vaccines which were of potential dual use concern. Additional information on these vaccines has therefore been requested.

Iran

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Iranian Foreign Minister concerning the position of the 13 Jews in Iran detained without trial, during the Iranian Foreign Minister's visit to London; and if he will make a statement. [104515]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary raised the cases of those detained on espionage charges, including 13 members of the Iranian Jewish community, with Foreign Minister Kharrazi during his visit from 10–12 January. Dr. Kharrazi assured them both that those detained would receive a fair trial including access to families and legal representation.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has further to pursue with Iran the case of the 13 Iranian Jews detained without trial. [104516]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary raised the cases of those detained on espionage charges, including 13 members of the Iranian Jewish community, with the Iranian Foreign Minister Dr. Kharrazi during his visit to London from 10–12 January. We and our EU partners will continue to raise this issue with the Iranian authorities at every possible opportunity.

British Overseas Territories

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 318W, on overseas territories, what plans his Department has to introduce an Order in Council to ensure that the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands change their existing legislation on homosexual acts. [104706]

Mr. Battle: The White Paper on the Overseas Territories (OTs) states that it is HMG's intention that OT legislation should comply with the international obligations to which the UK is subject. We pressed the OTs to announce before 31 December 1999 their intention to introduce legislation to decriminalise homosexual acts between consenting adults in private. That date having passed, we will shortly be reviewing the situation.

PRIME MINISTER

Joined-up Government

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Prime Minister when the Performance and Innovation Unit will publish reports on its studies into Accountability and Incentives for Joined-up Government and Analysis and Modelling in Central Government. [104852]

The Prime Minister: The Performance and Innovation Unit reports of these studies entitled "Wiring it Up: Whitehall's Management of Cross-cutting Policies and Services" and "Adding it Up: Improving Analysis and Modelling in Central Government" have been published today.

The two reports are key elements of the Modernising Government agenda for better policies and better services. They set out a blueprint for joined-up policy making and service delivery supported by evidence-based analysis.

Copies have been placed in the Libraries of the House and are also available from the Vote Office.

Intelligence and Security Committee

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Prime Minister when he expects to make an appointment to the Intelligence and Security Committee. [105234]

The Prime Minister: I have appointed my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton), to be member of the Intelligence and Security Committee in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who left the Committee following her appointment as a Minister.

United Kingdom European Delegations

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Prime Minister if he will announce the full composition of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Assembly of the Western European Union. [105233]

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Western European Union is as follows:

Leader

The right hon. Terry Davis MP

Full representatives	*Substitute Members*
David Atkinson MP	Malcolm Bruce MP
Sir Sydney Chapman MP	The right hon. The Lord Clinton-Davis
Michael Colvin MP	Mrs. Ann Cryer MP
Tom Cox MP	Mike Hancock CBE, MP
Lawrence Cunliffe MP	Robert Jackson MP
Bill Etherington MP	Ms Jenny Jones MP
Paul Flynn MP	The Lord Judd
Mrs. Maria Fyfe MP	The Baroness Knight of Collingtree DBE
The Lord Kirkhill	The Lord Lucas of Crudwell
Keven McNamara MP	Ms Chris McCafferty MP
Jim Marshall MP	Gwyn Prosser MP
Edward O'Hara MP	Syd Rapson MP
The Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede	Miss Geraldine Smith MP
The Lord Russell-Johnston	David Taylor MP
John D. Taylor MP	Dr. Rudi Vis MP
John Townend MP	John Wilkinson MP
James Wray MP	David Wilshire MP
	Anthony D. Wright MP

SCOTLAND

Hughes Report (Dunblane)

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland for what reasons the report on Thomas Hamilton by Sergeant Hughes is subject to a 100-year closure. [104520]

Dr. Reid: As the report contains sensitive information about children and alleged offences against them, it was considered appropriate that it should remain closed for 100 years. This closure is in accordance with current Government guidelines published in the White Paper "Open Government" (Cm 2290 (1993)). The Crown Office will deal with any requests for access meantime.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Land Register

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if a decision has been made on the proposal to restore price paid to the Land Register; and if he will make a statement. [105318]

Jane Kennedy: After extensive consultation, the Lord Chancellor has decided to restore "price paid" to the Land Register. This is consistent with the Government's policy to improve the house buying process by making important information more readily available, particularly at an early stage of the process. Information included in the Land Register should be as comprehensive as is practical and proper—property value is of great interest to people and there is no good reason why it should not be available.

The information will not be inserted retrospectively. All applications received by the Land Registry on or after 1 April 2000 will have the price paid entered on the Land Register where it is practicable to do so. As with other data, the Land Register will provide the current information. Hence, on a subsequent change of ownership, the original price paid will be removed from the register.

This change in practice will bring the Land Register for England and Wales into line with many other jurisdictions where the price paid for property is a matter of public record. This includes most of Europe and, notably, Scotland where this information has been publicly available since 1617 without appearing to cause any problems.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Drugs Education

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what level of support is being made available by his Department to primary and secondary schools for the delivery of drugs education in the financial year 1999–2000; and how much will be available in the following two years. [102794]

Jacqui Smith: Specific support to schools for drug education is available through the Standards Fund, via Local Education Authorities.

During 1999–2000, £7.5 million has been made available through the Standards Fund Drug Prevention Grant. For the financial year 2000–01 the Drug Prevention Grant will be incorporated into the larger Social Inclusion: Pupil Support, Drug Prevention and Youth Service (SIPS) Grant. A total of £140 million will be available through the SIPS grant and minimum of £7.5 million is available for Drug Education; however, LEAs may opt to spend more.

In line with the Anti-Drugs Strategy, the Department is seeking to deliver drug education within the wider context of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and the Healthy Schools Programme. We are supporting the development of PSHE through Standards Fund moneys, £12 million will be made available during 2000–01 for the development of PSHE and Citizenship in schools.

Levels of funding for 2001–02 and beyond fall into the coming CSR period and are yet to be agreed.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received from industry concerning the role of higher and further education colleges in the teaching of English as a foreign language. [104440]

Mr. Wicks: We have received representations from private training providers.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had regarding the role of further and higher education colleges in the teaching of English as a foreign language. [104441]

Mr. Wicks: My Department holds discussions as appropriate on this issue. For example, we have been closely involved with the Further Education Funding Council's review of English as a Foreign Language courses.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to involve institutions engaged in the teaching of English as a foreign language in reforms of higher and further education. [104443]

Mr. Wicks: In any reforms of further and higher education, we always welcome the views of institutions engaged in teaching English as a foreign language.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office regarding the role of the British Council in the teaching of English as a foreign language. [104442]

Mr. Wicks: The Department holds discussions periodically with the British Council about its role in promoting the learning of English as a foreign language.

SOCIAL SECURITY

CSA Computer System

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out the time scale for *(a)* the tendering process and *(b)* the production of the new computer system for the Child Support Agency; and if he will estimate the likely total cost of this project. [104705]

Angela Eagle: Discussions are currently in progress with the Department's private sector partner, the Affinity consortium, on the overall scope of the IT solution, a contract to develop and operate a new computer system, and the time scales for delivery. Costs are subject to negotiation.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the existing computer system operated by the Child Support Agency could support the calculations of maintenance liabilities under the new formula proposed in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill. [104704]

Angela Eagle: It might be possible to amend the Child Support Computer System to support a certain amount of work under the new system, but not without some difficulty.

Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is his policy under the provisions of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill that benefits will be suspended for offenders immediately following the Probation Service issuing breach proceedings on individual cases; and if he will make a statement. [104745]

Angela Eagle: The Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, which is currently being considered by Parliament, will reinforce the link between rights to benefits and responsibilities to society. Offenders aged 18 to 59, who are referred to Court for breaching a specified community sentence, will be subject to a benefit sanction from the first practicable benefit payday after the relevant benefits office receives a notification from the Probation Service that court proceedings have been initiated.

In the case of Jobseeker's Allowance and certain Training Allowances, benefit will be withdrawn. Hardship payments will be available for vulnerable groups and others at risk of hardship. Income Support recipients will have their benefit reduced by 40 per cent. or 20 per cent. of the single person's adult rate, subject to their circumstances.

This measure will initially be piloted. During the pilots the sanction period will be four weeks.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people he estimates will have their benefits suspended per annum following a breach of a community sentence under the terms of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill; and if he will make a statement. [104747]

Angela Eagle: It is not possible to provide an estimate of the number of people who will have their benefit withdrawn or reduced following a breach of a community sentence. Data collected by the Home Office indicate that, in England and Wales, around 25,000 people a year are currently referred to Court for breach proceedings. No information is held about how many of these are in receipt of Social Security benefits. After this measure is introduced, there is expected to be some behavioural effect which will reduce the number who breach their sentences.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security under the provisions of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill, how much money will be set aside for the Hardship Fund to be used in the case of withdrawal of benefits for the first financial year for which the provisions are implemented; and if he will make a statement. [104746]

Angela Eagle: There will be no "Hardship Fund". Hardship payments will be made, where appropriate, from general benefit expenditure. Similar arrangements already exist for making hardship payments where Jobseeker's Allowance is withdrawn as a result of labour market employment sanctions.

Pension Arrears

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what estimate he has made of the numbers of *(a)* widows and *(b)* pensioners awaiting payment of arrears of pensions in the Norwich, North constituency; [104519]

(2) what steps he is taking to rectify the problems associated with payment through the National Insurance Computer System; [104518]

(3) what estimate he has made of the number of staff hours of work necessary to distribute back-payments of pensions to *(a)* pensioners and *(b)* widows in the Norwich, North constituency. [104517]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given on 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 294–95W, to the hon. Members for Northavon (Mr. Webb) and for Havant (Mr. Willetts).

Ministers have taken a personal interest in addressing the system problems and have been actively involved in NIRS2 development, stabilisation and recovery.

The system problems affecting payments are our top priority. These payments relate to individuals who claim contributory benefits (Retirement Pension, Widows Benefits, Incapacity Benefit and Jobseeker's Allowance); and individuals who have contracted-out of the State Earnings-Related Pension Scheme and rebate payments are made to the Personal and Occupational Pension Provider who maintain their pension scheme.

The Inland Revenue, Benefits Agency and Andersen Consulting, through joint working, have made significant progress in clearing these problems. The vast majority of problems have been resolved and most of the functionality is in place and working. A plan has been agreed with Andersen Consulting for the delivery of the remaining functionality by 31 March 2000.

For the Norwich offices, of the outputs received relating to Widows, 79 remain to be cleared. For Retirement Pension, of the outputs received, 746 remain to be processed. However, until all claims have been reviewed it is not known in how many cases arrears will have been due.

The Benefits Agency has put in place contingency procedures to deal with back-payments to Pensioners and Widows utilising existing staff, which includes overtime working where appropriate. Up to 31 December 1999, the Norwich offices have worked 313 hours in dealing with claims to Widows Benefits and 2,823 hours on Retirement Pensions. Not all the cases dealt with have had arrears of benefits due.

All Work Test

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the exemption or otherwise from the all work test of those who were incapable of work between 1 December 1993 and 12 April 1995 under the transitional award of Incapacity Benefit. [104423]

Mr. Bayley: The all work test was introduced as the means of determining incapacity for work for benefit purposes from 13 April 1995. Under transitional arrangements, people who were entitled to the former

invalidity benefit between 1 December 1993 and 12 April 1995 (ignoring breaks of eight weeks or less) and who were aged 58 or over on 13 April 1995 are treated as satisfying the test as long as they continue to provide a doctor's statement as evidence of incapacity. In effect, the all work test is not applied to them.

Similar arrangements were made for people who at the time of the change were entitled to an income-related benefit (Income Support, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit) on the grounds of incapacity for work.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will take measures to ensure that Jobseeker's Allowance is paid to workers who are temporarily unemployed and not receiving wages during school holidays at *(a)* Christmas and *(b)* other holiday periods. [104369]

Angela Eagle: The Court of Appeal has confirmed that ancillary workers who are not entitled to receive Jobseeker's Allowance during term-time because of the hours they work are also not entitled to Jobseeker's Allowance during the school holidays.

We understand that the appellant in that case has applied for leave to appeal to the House of Lords. We are awaiting the outcome of that application.

Ancillary Workers

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many ancillary workers affected by the Social Security Commissioner's decision CIS/14661/1996 of December 1997 have *(a)* inquired about ex-gratia payments and *(b)* been given ex-gratia payments; and for what average amounts. [104104]

Angela Eagle: A total of 1,950 requests for ex-gratia payments have been received from ancillary workers affected by CIS/14661/1996. Of these, one ex-gratia payment of £337.03 has been made and 206 cases remain outstanding.

Ex-gratia payments can be considered only where there has been a loss of statutory entitlement to benefit. Since subsequent legal decisions reversed the effect of CIS/14661/1996, the current position is that there was never any statutory entitlement to JSA during school holiday periods for this group. Further ex-gratia payments cannot therefore be made under the law as it currently stands.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what factors underlay his decision not to pay the Winter Fuel Payment for 1999 to 2000 to people who reach the age of 60 after September 1999 but before 31 March 2000; and if he will reconsider his policy. [104082]

Angela Eagle: In order to issue Winter Fuel Payments automatically, without incurring disproportionate administration costs, most eligible people aged 60 and over are identified through official departmental computer records. These records hold the key information needed to establish entitlement. The records are used to decide whether people are entitled for at least a day during a specified qualifying week.

The current process for identifying those who are entitled and determining the amount payable takes around 10 weeks. Therefore, to ensure people receive the payments in good time to help with their winter fuel bills, the qualifying week must precede the onset of winter. This winter the qualifying week began on 20 September. Making the payments as early as possible in the winter ensures that the very elderly, who will include the vast majority of those who are most frail, have their payment when they need it.

There are currently no plans to change the method of determining eligibility.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the extension of Winter Fuel Payments to men aged 60 to 65 years will include *(a)* the £10 Christmas bonus and *(b)* previous winter fuel subsidy schemes. [104378]

Angela Eagle: The extension of Winter Fuel Payments to everyone aged 60 and over who is resident in Great Britain applies to the Winter Fuel Payments scheme only. Payments will be backdated to the start of the scheme.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how men aged 60 to 64 will claim the winter fuel payment for 1999 to 2000 and previous years; and what is his estimate of the cost for 1999 to 2000 and previous years. [104061]

Angela Eagle: It will be necessary to determine the names and addresses of people who are newly eligible for Winter Fuel Payments. As the information we hold may not be up to date, we will need to introduce a claims process for Winter Fuel Payments. This process will need to be developed carefully and appropriate IT systems built to deal with claims. The Benefits Agency are currently working on the operational issues for delivery.

There is no need for people newly eligible for Winter Fuel Payments to contact the Benefits Agency now. An announcement will be made, and an advertising campaign will begin in a matter of months.

Equalising the age of entitlement for Winter Fuel Payments at 60 for men and women will mean annual expenditure may increase by an estimated £85 million. Backdating the payments to the start of the scheme for up to 1.9 million people will have an estimated one-off programme cost of £115 million.

Secondary Education

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make benefits available to support 19-year-old students who wish to remain in full-time secondary education. [104276]

Angela Eagle: Responsibility for financial support of 19-year-old students who are in full-time education rests primarily with the student support system. Benefits are available only to full-time students who fall within certain vulnerable groups, such as lone parents and the disabled. We have no plans to change this.

Attendance and Disability Living Allowances

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what number and proportion of people aged over 60 years or over are entitled to, but are not receiving, *(a)* Attendance Allowance and *(b)* Disability Living Allowance. [104058]

Mr. Bayley: There are no reliable estimates of the number of people aged 60 years or over who might be entitled to these benefits if they were to make a claim.

However, provisional take-up estimates covering all ages and based on the disability follow-up to the Family Resources Survey are 40 per cent. to 60 per cent. for Attendance Allowance, 30 per cent. to 50 per cent. for the care component of Disability Living Allowance and 50 per cent. to 70 per cent. for the mobility component.

Nursing Home Residents (Income Support)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many residents of residential or nursing homes *(a)* in total, *(b)* aged 65 years or over and *(c)* aged under 65 years who are entitled to preserved rights to Income Support are being charged more than the level of their preserved rights to Income Support. [104060]

Mr. Bayley: At August 1999, we estimate that 36,000 people resident in residential care or nursing homes who have preserved rights to Income Support and are being charged more than the level of their preserved rights to Income Support, 16,000 of these are aged under 65 years, and 20,000 are aged over 65 years.

Notes:

1. Numbers are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

2. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest thousand.

3. Cases where charges exceed the IS limits are based on the Income Support limit amount for the type of care provided for the claimant, and the actual charge made for the claimant. No account is taken of the amount paid to the claimant in respect of personal expenses.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1999.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many residents of residential or nursing homes *(a)* in total, *(b)* aged 65 years or over and *(c)* aged under 65 years have preserved rights to Income Support. [104062]

Mr. Bayley: At August 1999, 84,000 people had preserved rights to Income Support. 36,000 are aged under 65 years. 48,000 are aged over 65 years.

Notes:

1. Numbers are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

2. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest thousand.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry, August 1999.

Residential Care

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what discussions he has had with local authorities in England and Wales in the last year as to the provision of long-term residential care within that authority's area. [104049]

Mr. Bayley: None.

Pneumoconiosis

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many claimants are in receipt of awards for pneumoconiosis, broken down by *(a)* disease category, *(b)* age and *(c)* coalfield; [104253]

(2) how many claimants in receipt of an award for category two pneumoconiosis or more were first diagnosed with category one, broken down by *(a)* age and *(b)* coalfield. [104254]

Mr. Bayley: The information requested is not available. Such information as is available is set out in the tables.

The number of awards of industrial injuries disablement benefit in payment for pneumoconiosis (prescribed disease D1) by industry, and, within the coal industry, by age, and by government office region

Industries[1,2]	*Number of Pneumoconiosis currently in payment*
All industries	12,100
Mining (and agglomeration) of hard coal	7,800
Other mining and quarrying	300
Manufacture of other non-metallic mineral products	500
Manufacture of basic metals	300
Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi trailers and other transport equipment	900
Construction	1,200
Other industries	1,200

[1] Industries are based on the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) of economic activities 1992.

[2] Figures are rounded and may not sum. For a 10 per cent. sample, figures are statistically reliable where there are 200 or more in the sample.

Source:

DSS (Analytical Services Division) 10 per cent. sample data, including an adjustment for late statistical returns. Figures are for April 1998—the most recent data available.

Ages[1]	*Number of pneumoconiosis currently in payment in the coal industry*
All ages	7,800
Under 60	400
60–64	400
65–69	900
70–74	2,200
75–79	1,800
80–84	1,300
85 and over	700

[1] Figures are rounded and may not sum. For a 10 per cent. sample, figures are statistically reliable where there are 200 or more in the sample.

Source:

DSS (Analytical Services Division) 10 per cent. sample data, including an adjustment for late statistical returns. Figures are for April 1998—the most recent data available.

Government office region[1]	Number of Pneumoconiosis currently in payment in the coal industry
Great Britain	7,800
North East	800
Yorks and Humber	1,700
East Midlands	1,000
East	—
London	—
South East	—
South West	—
West Midlands	700
North West	500
Wales	2,500
Scotland	200

[1] Figures are rounded and may not sum. For a 10 per cent. sample, figures are statistically reliable where there are 200 or more in the sample.

Source:
DSS (Analytical Services Division) 10 per cent. sample data, including an adjustment for late statistical returns. Figures are for April 1998—the most recent data available.

Pensioners (Benefit Entitlement)

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the number of pensioners entitled to but not receiving benefits, excluding the double counting of those entitled to but receiving more than one credit. [104079]

Mr. Rooker: Information on numbers of pensioners entitled to but not receiving benefit was previously provided as follows. It is not possible to break down the total number any further so as to avoid all double counting, as we do not have the information available in this format.

Take-up of income related benefits by pensioner benefit units 1997–98

	Income Support	Housing Benefit	Council Tax Benefit	Total
Average number of recipients[1]	1,470	1,830	2,600	5,870
Numbers entitled but not receiving benefit[1]	530–870	0–250	640–1,190	1,170–2,310
Percentage take-up rate	63–73	88–100	69–80	72–83

[1] Thousands

Notes:
1. Estimates are based on the 1997–98 Family Resources Survey.
2. Estimated numbers entitled to but not receiving benefit have been rounded to the nearest 10,000 cases. The sum of the components (the individual benefits) may not add up to the total due to rounding.
3. A pensioner benefit unit is defined as a single person aged 60 or over or a couple (not necessarily married) at least one of whom is aged 60 or over.
4. The estimates under "Total" in the table refer to the total of Income Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. They should be regarded as rough estimates only because they count recipients of more than one benefit more than once and count those entitled to but not receiving more than one benefit more than once.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what research he has undertaken, and what assessment he has made, of the level and pattern of debt among the target group for stakeholder pensions. [104143]

Mr. Rooker: Some information is available from departmental and other surveys on levels of debt generally, although no specific assessment has been attempted which would link such data to information about pension provision and the stakeholder pensions target group. Stakeholder pension schemes will give up to 5 million people on moderate earnings the option of a secure, flexible and value-for-money funded pension. We believe that those who can afford to save for their retirement should do so, but the affordability of pension contributions in relation to other commitments is a matter for individual decision.

TREASURY

Air Passenger Duty

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of Air Passenger Duty revenues derive from flights within the United Kingdom; and what was the value of such revenues in the last financial year. [104439]

Mr. Timms: It is estimated that Air Passenger Duty (APD) payable on domestic UK flights accounts for some 8–9 per cent. of total APD revenue, amounting to approximately £70 million for the financial year 1998–99.

Mutual Societies

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will issue information to the public on the rights and entitlements of policy holders and borrowers from mutual societies in relation to the disposal and ownership of these organisations. [104521]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Mutuals can take a variety of legal forms. Entitlements to distributions on a winding-up, merger, or conversion are matters for each mutual to determine.

Developing Country Debt

Ms Drown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what basis his Department has calculated that the recently agreed $100 billion debt relief package represents cancellation of two thirds of developing country debt. [104370]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The total debt stock of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries likely to qualify for relief under the enhanced HIPC initiative as having an unsustainable debt burden after traditional debt relief mechanisms is $143 billion. The enhanced HIPC initiative will reduce the debts owed by these countries by $100 billion, or two thirds.

We want the enhanced HIPC initiative to start a new virtuous cycle of debt relief, poverty alleviation and economic development. The transformation of the IMF's structural adjustment facility into the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility means that, for the first time, the IMF and World Bank have agreed to stand back and let countries develop their own poverty reduction strategies in partnership with the population and civil society.

Having helped to secure multilateral funding for the initiative, the Government have decided that the time is right to take the extra step of eliminating all the bilateral debts owned to us by the poorest countries. Our pledge of 100 per cent. debt relief for countries qualifying under the HIPC initiative will cover all debts (both pre cut-off date debt and post cut-off date debt) owed to ECGD by these countries.

Drug Trafficking

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent measures have been taken to tighten control of UK borders in order to prevent drug trafficking; and if he will make a statement. [104360]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs continually review the deployment of their anti-smuggling and investigation staff both nationally and locally to ensure they remain in line with priorities and changing patterns of smuggling risk.

Customs maintains agreements with private companies and border agencies to ensure close co-operation.

Customs have recently installed an Automatic Number Plate Reader at Dover in a joint project with Kent Constabulary and are in the process of installing similar systems at other ports.

Asset Sales

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the items in the National Assets Register sold by his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies since 22 March 1999, stating in each case the amount of money realised; if he will estimate the total amount raised from such sales to date; and if he will make a statement. [104476]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 8 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 438W.

HEALTH

Health Expenditure (Essex)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimates he has made of the expected deficit in the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area for health care in the financial year 1999–2000; [98555]

(2) what estimates he has made of the expected deficit in the North Essex Health Authority area for health care in the financial year 1999–2000. [98556]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 24 November 1999]:* The income and expenditure positions of the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area and North Essex Health Authority area are forecast at Quarter 2 (September 1999) as given. These forecasts were prepared before the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 21 December 1999 of an extra £134 million for the health service; £90 million relating to the costs of generic drugs has been allocated to health authorities. North Essex Health Authority has been allocated £1.5 million of this. The remaining £44 million will be allocated, as required, to meet the cost of clinical negligence claims.

The income and expenditure position of North Essex Health Authority in financial year 1999–2000 is forecast at Quarter 2 (September 1999) to be a surplus of £970,000.

The income and expenditure position of Mid Essex Community and Mental Health in financial year 1999–2000 is forecast at Quarter 2 (September 1999) to be a deficit of £149,000.

The income and expenditure position of Mid Essex Hospital Services in financial year 1999–2000 is forecast at Quarter 2 (September 1999) to be a deficit of £4.2 million.

Mid Essex Hospital Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area have been waiting 12 months or more for treatment. [104445]

Mr. Denham: The most recent published inpatient waiting list figures are those for October 1999. These figures show that, at Mid Essex Hospital National Health Service Trust, a total of 1,024 patients were waiting 12 months and over for treatment at the end of October 1999.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people had been waiting more than 18 months for treatment in the Mid Essex Hospital Trust area between 1 November 1999 and the latest date for which figures are available; and how long each patient waited or was waiting for treatment over 18 months. [104446]

Mr. Denham: The last published figures for waiting times are those for October 1999. These show that at the end of October 1999, no patients waited over 18 months for treatment at Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Services Trust.

The next published figures will be those for November 1999, due to be published in the week commencing 10 January 2000. Until these figures are published, no centrally collected and validated figures are available.

Mammograms

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what target his Department sets NHS trusts and health authorities for the maximum period for a patient to be notified of the results of a mammogram X-ray; and what is the actual maximum period for patients served by Essex Rivers Healthcare Trust in the most recent period for which figures are available. [101364]

Yvette Cooper: The National Health Service breast screening programme sets standards to ensure that the performance of all breast screening programmes is monitored on a consistent national basis. One of these is that at least 90 per cent. of women should receive the

results of their mammogram within two weeks. This is to minimise the anxiety for women who are awaiting their results. This standard is monitored by local screening programmes and regional quality assurance teams.

Essex Rivers Healthcare NHS Trust (Colchester and Chelmsford breast screening unit) screened 11,147 women between 1 April 1999 and 31 August 1999. 78.3 per cent. of women were sent their results within two weeks. 93.6 per cent. of women were sent their results within three weeks. 0.3 per cent. (41 women) waited over five weeks for their results. The trust is looking to appoint a further radiologist to help reach the minimum standard of 90 per cent. of women receiving their results within two weeks.

NHS Pension Scheme

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assumptions the actuary made at the time of the last report on the NHS pension scheme about the proportion of *(a)* contributing members *(b)* deferred members and *(c)* pensioners on their death who would have qualifying partner survivors; and what assumptions he makes currently. [104268]

Mr. Denham: The National Health Service Pension Scheme only pays survivor benefits to legal spouses or dependent children. The Government Actuary assumed that the proportion of members married at death varies by age. The proportion increased with age up to retirement, and then reduced with increasing age thereafter, allowing for the likelihood that the spouse may have predeceased the member.

The actuarial assumptions are based on an analysis of the experience within the scheme. For the last report, it was assumed that on average 66 per cent. of contributing and deferred members would have an entitlement to a survivor's benefit, if death occurred in the following year. The assumption for pensioners was 50 per cent. These assumptions will be reviewed as part of the next report, which is expected to be available around mid-2001.

Transplant Surgeons

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the number of serving transplant surgeons in the NHS. [104312]

Mr. Denham: At national level we do not plan centrally the numbers of consultants who specialise in transplant surgery. We plan the numbers of consultants in general surgery and related specialities, taking into account information gathered from a range of sources, including the medical Royal Colleges, Regional Postgraduate Medical Deans and National Health Service management, which includes information about consultants specialising in transplant surgery.

At local level, it is NHS trusts and health authorities who are accountable for the quality of the services they provide, to determine how their services are configured and delivered, in the light of local circumstances, in order to provide quality services to patients. This includes deciding on the number and grades of posts in their locality.

At national level, The Speciality Workforce Advisory Group (SWAG) advises on the numbers of higher specialist trainees needed to meet future requirements for consultants. SWAG has advised previously that general surgery has been a speciality with shortages of consultants. Over the past four years, it has recommended increases in the numbers of higher specialist training opportunities. We are now satisfied that there are enough training opportunities in general surgery for there to be sufficient candidates qualifying for consultant posts over the next few years.

Representations have been made to the Department about shortages of transplant surgeons in the NHS. We will continue to engage in discussions with the Royal College of Surgeons and the Regional Postgraduate Medical Deans and others responsible for training and career prospects, with the aim of ensuring that all the organ transplant services are fully supported.

Christie Hospital NHS Trust

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on what occasions since 1 May 1997 a Minister in his Department has visited the Christie Hospital NHS Trust. [104606]

Mr. Denham: It has so far not been possible for any of the Ministers at this Department to visit the Christie Hospital.

Cancer Patients

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the Government's target is for the maximum length of time cancer patients will have to wait *(a)* to see a consultant after a GP has referred them and *(b)* to be treated once a consultant has seen the patient. [104447]

Mr. Denham: From April 1999, patients with suspected breast cancer have been able to see a specialist within two weeks of their general practitioner referring them urgently for investigation. We will roll out this approach to other cancer sites so that by the end of 2000 we will make this high quality standard of care available for all suspected cancer requiring an urgent specialist appointment. We will also tackle patient uncertainty about the timing of their treatment through the cancer services collaborative, part of the booked admissions programme, which will improve patient access to diagnosis, treatment and care. The cancer services collaborative currently covers a population of 14 million. Lessons learned from the collaborative will be shared with the wider National Health Service from 2001.

Parliamentary Questions

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will provide a substantive reply to the Question tabled by the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet on 24 November 1999 for answer on 29 November relating to health spending in Barnet (ref. 100215). [104603]

Mr. Denham: I replied to the hon. Member on 11 January.

Hip Operations

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library a copy of his reply to the letter of 1 December from Professor William Bonfield concerning statistics on hip operations. [104510]

Mr. Hutton: A copy of the letter will be placed in the Library.

Organic Produce

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to inform the public of the benefits to health of organically grown produce. [103788]

Yvette Cooper: The Government have not published specific advice on the health benefits of organically grown produce. This is because at present there is little information available on which to make meaningful comparisons between nutrient contents or organic and conventional produce.

A study commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on the nutritional composition of organically grown fruit and vegetables found only small differences in levels of some nutrients between organically grown and conventionally grown fruit and vegetables. However, it did note that confounding variables, such as differences in the variety grown and the age of samples, made it difficult to draw comparisons. A handful of similar studies have been published in the mainstream scientific literature since. In general, these have found no consistent or significant differences in nutrient content between organic and conventional produce.

The Government stress the importance of a balanced diet for good health based on evidence-based studies. We have funded, through the Health Education Authority, a variety of projects aimed at improving access to, and availability of, healthy eating choices and at encouraging people to eat less fat and more cereals, fruit and vegetables.

Leicester NHS Trust

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he will appoint a Chairman for the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust; [104607]

(2) when he expects the Chief Executive of the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust to be appointed. [104608]

Mr. Denham: On 11 January Philip Hammersley CBE was appointed to serve as Chairman of the University Hospitals of Leicester National Health Service Trust for the period 17 January 2000 to 31 October 2002.

Following Mr. Hammersley's appointment, I expect the task of appointing a new chief executive for the trust to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Continence Services

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish the NHS guidance on continence services. [104357]

Mr. Hutton: We have recently received the report from the Working Group which was set up to advise the Department on guidance for continence services. We are now considering the report and hope to publish guidance shortly.

Audiology Services

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will receive the report of the working group into hearing aids and audiology services. [104730]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave her on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 444W.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Farmers (Early Retirement)

10. **Mr. Öpik:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he made of the projected costs of an early retirement scheme for farmers. [103782]

Ms Quin: Any assessment of the cost of an early retirement scheme would depend on a number of variables including grant rates, eligibility criteria, number of applications and administrative costs. However, given the potential sums involved and the mixed reactions to the proposals, we firmly believe that a much better use of the funds to help the agricultural sector is provided for in the rural development measures we have announced.

Pig Industry

11. **Mr. Malcolm Bruce:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he proposes to take to support the British pig industry. [103783]

Mr. Nick Brown: Within the constraints imposed by the light nature of the EU pigmeat regime and the need to respect the law, I will continue to do all I can to help.

21. **Sir Robert Smith:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on compensation for the pig industry in relation to the costs of complying with regulations to deal with BSE. [103795]

Mr. Nick Brown: I have had no formal discussions with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on this matter.

Energy Crops

12. **Mr. Olner:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to increase support for energy crops; and if he will make a statement. [103784]

Ms Quin: On 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 701–02W, my right hon. Friend the Minister announced plans for implementation of the EU Rural Development Regulation, which included support of around £30 million for energy crops. This will help the Government achieve their targets for greenhouse gas emissions and renewable energy generation.

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

13. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to expand the countryside stewardship scheme. [103785]

Mr. Morley: I have already announced plans for a major expansion of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. Over the next seven years, spending on agri-environment schemes will double. Of the £1 billion to be allocated during this period to these schemes, £500 million will be for the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. We will be discussing with farming and conservation organisations how the extra funding should be used to achieve the best environmental value for money.

24. **Mr. Grogan:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the value of the countryside stewardship scheme to rural conservation. [103798]

Mr. Morley: We believe, as do most environmental organisations, that the Countryside Stewardship is of considerable value to rural conservation, and I recently announced a very significant expansion of the Scheme. We are currently funding an independent study to assess the environmental benefits of the Scheme in more detail.

Bovine TB

14. **Dr. Naysmith:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the incidence of bovine TB in the west of England. [103786]

Ms Quin: Provisional figures for the first nine months of 1999 show that there were 648 confirmed new cases of TB in cattle in Great Britain, mostly in the west and south-west of England, compared with 565 in the same period in 1998. That is why the Government are pressing ahead with their TB control strategy, based on independent scientific advice.

Dairy Farming

15. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the prospects for dairy farmers over the next two years. [103787]

Ms Quin: All dairy farmers face challenging times as a result of reduced milk prices, increased liberalisation of world markets and progress on CAP reform. But the dairy farming sector's ability to respond positively to these challenges will be helped by the high level of producer expertise and commitment, favourable farm structure and ideal climate for milk production.

Farmers (Marketing)

16. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps his Department is taking to help farmers in marketing and product development. [103789]

Ms Quin: Many. For instance, £2 million was made available at the end of last year to support projects designed to help farmers improve their marketing. Over the next seven years I am providing £44 million for marketing and processing grants and additional expenditure for the marketing of quality agricultural products under the new Rural Enterprise Scheme.

Food Labelling

17. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to improve the labelling of food to enable consumers to make better-informed choices. [103791]

Ms Quin: We are committed to promoting informed consumer choice. Because of the key importance of good labelling, the Government will shortly be announcing an initiative aimed at stimulating public debate and identifying the needs and priorities of ordinary consumers.

Fisheries Council

18. **Dr. Ladyman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the outcome of the December Fisheries Council. [103792]

Mr. Morley: The outcome respected the scientific advice while maximising catching opportunities for the UK industry. Cuts in UK quotas worth £30 million were avoided. The Council and Commission also committed themselves to introduce a recovery programme for Irish Sea cod.

Organic Farming

19. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the environmental advantages of organic farming. [103793]

Mr. Morley: Evaluation of the environmental impact of organic farming is one of the three objectives of the Ministry's organic R&D programme, for which £2.1 million has been allocated for 1999–2000. Field studies on biodiversity and soil fertility on organic farms, following up earlier desk studies, and a study of nutrient recycling are in progress. Work on nitrates and ammonia emissions has recently been completed.

22. **Jean Corston:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers entered into organic conversion in 1999. [103796]

Mr. Morley: Around 1,100 farmers applied for aid under the Organic Farming Scheme in 1999.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what further plans he has to support organic farming. [103774]

Mr. Morley: On 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 701–02W, my right hon. Friend the Minister announced the Government's plans for spending on the Rural Development Programme for England. Under these plans, £140 million will be available over the life of the Programme for aid for conversion to organic farming.

CAP

20. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the annual cost for the typical family of the common agricultural policy. [103794]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary gave to my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr. Borrow) on 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 748W.

Beef Ban

23. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive relating to the current French ban on British beef. [103797]

Mr. Nick Brown: My ministerial colleagues, my officials and I have been in regular contact with our counterparts in the Scottish Executive on the French import ban on UK beef.

Organophosphates

25. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research he plans to carry out on the effects of organophosphates. [103799]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply on 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 446W.

Compensation

26. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the availability of monetary compensation to British farmers for the value of sterling. [103800]

Ms Quin: Up to £88 million in compulsory agrimonetary compensation will be paid to livestock and arable farmers this year, and a further £44 million next year. Optional compensation is available this year; figures are not yet confirmed. No decision has been taken on whether to pay any of this.

Forestry Commission Land

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will name the areas of Forestry Commission land which he has approved for sale since May 1997 and give the acreage of each area. [102633]

Mr. Morley: The subject of the question relates to matters undertaken by Forest Enterprise. I have asked its Chief Executive, Dr. Bob McIntosh, to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Bob McIntosh to Mr. Huw Edwards, dated 13 January 2000:

I have been asked to reply to your question to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food asking for the names of areas of Forestry Commission land approved for sale since May 1997.

Firstly, I should explain that the Forestry Commission is responsible for deciding which areas to sell, in accordance with the policy and guidance laid down by Ministers. The Minister, therefore, does not approve individual areas for sale.

I enclose a list of the woods in England which have been offered for sale since May 1997, including the area and Grid Reference.

Forestry commission woods in England offered for sale since 1 May 1997

Wood	*Area (Hectares)*	*NGR*
Land at Dryderdale	6.0	SE 655 719
Gravel Pit and Broomhill Woods	6.0	SE 703 458
Dalby Bush	36.0	SE 640 715
Mill Wood, Terrington (pt)	24.0	SE 644 735
Foulshaw Moss	220.0	SD 458 825
Ulpha Park	29.0	SD 191 912
Simpsons Wood	6.0	NY 179 337
Foulshaw and Wilderness	57.0	SD 458 825
Barthorps Folly	6.0	TM 348 459
Top Clump and West Belt	4.5	TG 145 211
Oakhill Wood	33.3	SP 813 357
College Wood	51.0	SP 791 331
Gatten Plantation	34.0	SO 372 986
Land at Oversley Wood	0.6	SJ 110 567
Bishops Wood	2.5	SX 001 697
Penny Wood	1.0	ST 985 442
Staple Hill	11.0	SX 836 740
Greens Wood	1.5	TL 277 170
Friston Forest	10.2	TQ 535 018
Channers Wood	15.0	SU 818 814
Beech and Howlets Wood	7.0	SP 958 005
Hoo Wood	18.0	TL 033 125
Shabbington Wood	2.6	SP 632 106
Deershill Wood	11.0	SS 520 172
Priest Wood	28.0	TL 301 160
Pt Fleming Estate	20.8	SU 420 175
Stanley Cottages Wood	31.0	SZ 168 390
Worsall Gill and Fox Covert	30.0	NZ 381 070
Hugset Wood	34.0	SE 305 068
Seaton Old Wood	30.5	SE 785 389
Goss Hall	4.2	SK 344 620
Black and New Plantation	14.0	SE 793 367
Brandon Wood	72.0	SP 395 765
Bedpark	8.0	SX 584 538
Challock Benacre Wood	25.0	TQ 945 440
Redcap/Catham etc.	14.0	SU 785 421
Kennel Wood	6.0	SK 322 533
Millerhill and Wigfield	5.0	SE 341 021
Blackbrooks, Park Wood (Exchange)	76.7	SO 660 220
Chilworth Common North	12.0	SU 410 182
The Wilton Estate (Exchange)	51.0	SU 045 346
Knowle Wood	8.0	SX 533 641
Widow Bushes	11.0	TL 305 176
Samgarth Woods	71.0	SD 132 945
Intake Wood	20.0	SK 594 638
Sawpit Copse	9.6	SU 527 103

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 17 January 2000

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Ladbroke Grove Rail Accident

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the prospects for criminal prosecutions being started relating to the Paddington rail disaster. [104709]

The Solicitor-General: The British Transport Police are conducting a thorough investigation into the circumstances of the train collision in the vicinity of Ladbroke Grove on Tuesday 5 October 1999. As the police complete aspects of their inquiries, they intend to submit for advice reports, together with supporting evidence, to the Crown Prosecution Service. The prospects for criminal proceedings by the CPS are dependent on evidence derived from the police investigation, and not, for example, from evidence given to the public inquiry to be conducted by Lord Cullen, as that inquiry has an entirely different function. It is plainly not possible to anticipate, nor is it appropriate to speculate on, what evidence will be obtained by the police. When police inquiries conclude, the decision on whether or not to institute criminal proceedings will be made by the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Crown Prosecution Service, in consultation with the Law Officers. I understand that the HSE will also be considering the possibility of bringing a prosecution.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the decision to offer immunity to railway companies offering evidence to the inquiry into the Ladbroke Grove accident. [104629]

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Solicitor-General what recent representations he has received relating to immunity from prosecution for those giving evidence before a tribunal with special reference to the Paddington rail disaster; and if he will make a statement. [104710]

The Solicitor-General: On 29 November 1999 the Attorney-General authorised Lord Cullen to provide potential witnesses to his inquiry with the following undertaking:

> "To undertake in respect of any person who provides evidence to the inquiry that no evidence he or she may give before the inquiry (whether orally or by written statement) nor any written statement made preparatory to giving evidence nor any documents produced by that person to the inquiry will be used in evidence against him or her in any criminal proceedings, except in proceedings where he or she is charged with having given false evidence in the course of this inquiry or having conspired with or procured others to do so".

The purpose of authorising Lord Cullen to provide an undertaking in these terms was to enable him to begin his inquiry immediately, and to ensure that it would be fully effective. It was certain that without such an undertaking being given potential witnesses would be inhibited from providing Lord Cullen with full assistance. The public interest clearly favoured Lord Cullen undertaking his inquiry as soon as possible, and thereafter proceeding quickly, so that lessons can be learned from the circumstances that led to this tragedy. The undertaking is not the same as an immunity from prosecution: it has a much more limited effect.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Water Industry (Mersey Basin)

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the environmental improvements agreed by Ofwat for the Mersey Basin for the next price review to be completed in 2005. [104292]

Mr. Meacher: I have placed in the House Libraries a list of the schemes allowed for in the final determination of water industry price limits announced by Director General Ofwat on 25 July 1999, which will improve the waters in the Mersey Basin. The list is made up of 60 continuous discharges and 516 intermittent discharges. These were proposed by the Environment Agency and approved by me as part of my guidance to Ofwat on the provision to be made for investments by water companies to achieve environmental improvements. The Environment Agency is exploring in more detail the benefits of a further five schemes to allow us to assess these against improved information on costs from Ofwat and North West Water.

International Panel on Pollution Control

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has made to *(a)* the European Commission and *(b)* other EU member states in respect of a common basis of charging for IPPC throughout the EU; and what response he has received. [104114]

Mr. Hill: The IPPC Directive makes no provision for a common charging scheme; in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, charging is a matter for individual member states.

London Underground (Investment)

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is forecast to be the total level of investment in the London Underground in *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. [104230]

Mr. Prescott: *(a)* Planned investment in the Underground in 2000–01 totals £753 million (in outturn prices). This comprises investment of £535 million in the core Underground and a projected £218 million in payments to JLE contractors for investment that took place in previous years.

(b) For 2001–02 and beyond, the Public Private Partnership currently under negotiation is designed to deliver around £8 billion worth of investment. PPP contractors will be required to implement a combination of specific projects and performance enhancements specified in terms of outputs to be delivered. Because the

PPP contracts will require the delivery of service outputs, they will not generally specify particular works to be carried out or the amounts of money to be spent on them.

Domestic Plumbing

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the regulations covering domestic plumbing will come into force; and if he will take steps to ensure toilet flushes using valves do not waste more water than those using syphon systems. [104424]

Mr. Meacher: The Water Supply (Water Fittings) Regulations came into force on 1 July 1999. They prevent the contamination and waste of water supplies. A WC Suite Performance Specification, made under the Regulations, will come into effect on 1 January 2001. This will require all new WC suites, whether they use valve or syphon flushing mechanisms, to perform to the same high standards of durability and water conservation.

Transport White Paper (Countryside Proposals)

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he has *(a)* taken and ((b) proposes to implement the commitment in the Transport White Paper to a more peaceful countryside. [104576]

Mr. Hill: My Department is an active participant in the Countryside Agency's Countryside Traffic Measures Group, and its Quiet Roads and Greenways Network Co-ordination Meetings. We provide support in the form of advice when required on traffic signing, and on highways and traffic matters. Research is in place, and more is planned, to monitor the success of schemes in these initiatives.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to support the adoption of a biosafety protocol allowing Governments to prohibit imports of genetically modified organisms. [104586]

Mr. Meacher: Yes. The Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity would establish Advanced Informed Agreement (AIA) procedures, whereby a Party of import could accept or refuse imports of certain living (genetically) modified organisms (LMOs) on the basis of the impacts on biodiversity.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to support the adoption of a biosafety protocol making companies that produce genetically modified organisms legally liable for any future damage to the environment or public health resulting from the import of those GMOs by another country. [104584]

Mr. Meacher: In the negotiations on the Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity resuming in Montreal later this month, we will continue to support an enabling provision that would adopt a process elaborating international rules and procedures in the field of liability and redress for damage resulting from transboundary movements of living (genetically) modified organisms, and endeavour to complete the process within four years.

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to support the adoption of a biosafety protocol requiring the separation of genetically modified grain from other grain. [104585]

Mr. Meacher: The draft text of the Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity does not require separation. However, EU Ministers have agreed that information exchange and documentation requirements are needed under the Protocol and should ensure satisfactory transparency and monitoring of movements of LMOs as well as their identification, which would also enable traceability.

Train Protection Systems

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what progress has been made with the train operating companies in respect of installing train protection systems; [104597]

(2) what timetable has been agreed for the installation of train protection systems in all rolling stock, including the final date for completion. [104665]

Mr. Hill: The Railway Safety Regulations, laid before Parliament on 10 August 1999, requires train protection systems to be introduced and operational across the railway network by the end of 2003 at the latest.

At the Rail Safety Summit on 30 November the train operators announced that they have agreed a timetable to fit 33 per cent. of trains by the end of 2001, 75 per cent. of trains by the end of 2002 and all trains by the end of 2003. Also at the Summit, Railtrack agreed to aim to install train protection at 12,000 sites by the end of 2002.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what decision he has reached about the preferred system of train protection. [104628]

Mr. Hill: Following the Ladbroke Grove train accident the Government asked Sir David Davies, the President of the Royal Academy of Engineering, to report on the effectiveness, practicability and cost of train protection systems, and on how best to reduce the present incidence of signals passed at danger (SPADs). Ministers expect to receive his report shortly.

This information will be available to Lord Cullen (who is conducting the Public Inquiry into the Ladbroke Grove accident) and Professor Uff (conducting the Southall Inquiry), and they will jointly consider train protection systems. The Health and Safety Commission will advise the Government on any recommendations they make.

Confidential Telephone Reporting Systems

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what time scale has been agreed with the train operating companies and Railtrack to install the confidential telephone reporting system; and what is the final deadline for its implementation. [104596]

Mr. Hill: At the second Rail Safety Summit on 30 November 1999 Railtrack and the train operating companies agreed that the independent and confidential incident reporting system, which will allow all staff to phone in any safety concerns, will be extended throughout Great Britain by the end of 2000. Regional contracts are to be let by April 2000. The system will be fully operative by the end of 2000.

Underground Storage Tanks

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to provide funding for *(a)* enforcing and overseeing corrective action at leaking underground storage tank sites and *(b)* clean-ups (i) where the owner or operator is unknown, or is unwilling or unable to respond and (ii) which require emergency action. [104638]

Mr. Meacher: The main responsibilities for regulating underground storage tanks, including enforcing and overseeing corrective action when they are leaking, are held by the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the petroleum licensing authorities. The legal powers available to these bodies, and the detailed allocation of responsibilities between them, varies according to what is stored in the tank and the type of pollution incident involved. The Environment Agency is funded through grant-in-aid paid by my department as well as by charges paid by those seeking permits and licences. The Health and Safety Executive is also funded through grant-in-aid as well as from charges for certain activities which are recovered from industry. The petroleum licensing authorities are part of local government, and as such are funded through a combination of council tax, non-domestic rates and revenue support grant paid by my Department.

In cases where leaks have occurred and clean-up action is necessary, responsibility for paying for the work generally falls on the owner or operator of the tank. Depending on what was stored in the tank, and the nature of the problems which the leak has caused, this responsibility may be enforced under a number of legal powers. These include the works notice system in sections 161–161D of the Water Resources Act 1991, under which the Environment Agency may itself carry out works in an emergency or where it appears after reasonable inquiry that no person can be found on whom to serve a works notice; the statutory nuisance regime in Part III of the Environmental Protection Act 1990; and the Groundwater Regulations 1998. These powers will be supplemented in April by a new regime for remediating contaminated land, under Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (which was inserted by section 57 of the Environment Act 1995). An additional £12 million per year has been added to Standard Spending Assessments for local authorities in England to support their role under the new contaminated land regime.

The Contaminated Land Supplementary Credit Approval programme also provides capital expenditure support for local authorities in England to deal with cases where land contamination is causing unacceptable risks to human health and the environment, and where no-one else can be made to pay for the necessary remediation. This could include circumstances where leaks have occurred from underground storage tanks. The total provision in the current financial year for this programme is £12.082 million. A further £1.958 million has been provided to the Environment Agency as additional grant-in-aid to support equivalent work it is carrying out.

Transport Symposium, Kegworth

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for Ministers to attend the symposium, organised by the Institution of Highways and Transportation, on 20 January at Kegworth, Derby. [104579]

Mr. Hill: No invitation was extended to Ministers to speak at the symposium.

Local Government Pension Schemes

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the increased contributions which local government employers will have to make to their pension schemes in order to offset the effect of the ACT charges in the 1997 Budget; and what these extra contributions are as a percentage of the total payroll costs. [104674]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The effect of the abolition of advance corporation tax on employer contributions to local authority pension funds was one of many factors taken into account in the 1998 actuarial valuation exercise. Information on increases to individual local authority employers' contributions specifically attributable to this aspect of the exercise is not collected centrally.

The Local Government Association estimated that the average net impact of the 1998 valuation, including the effect of the ACT changes on employers' contributions in 1999–2000 was 1 per cent., or about £130 million nationally. We have honoured undertakings given at the time of the 1997 Budget to take into account this and all the other factors identified in the valuation exercise in determining the level of local authority provision in 1999–2000, and for subsequent years.

Millennium Celebration

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if the river of fire on new year's eve worked according to plan; [104434]

(2) if he will make a statement on the public transport arrangements in London on new year's eve. [104435]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* I refer the hon. Member to the oral reply I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 11 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 138. I would also add that the transport operators provided the absolute maximum service possible. Tube and DLR provided a peak level service from midnight to after 4 am (20 trains an hour for the tube). Train operators ran the maximum service possible from 1 am to after 4.30 am. LT ran nearly double the usual night bus service. We always warned that people should expect long delays. Most people were able to catch a train or tube before 2.30 am. Despite a very high level of attendance the transport operators were able to get people both safely to the event, and back home again after.

It is true that the "River of Fire" did not live up to some people's expectations, but this should not detract from the spectacular success of the event. Indeed, CNN described London's Big Time fireworks as the

"most spectacular firework show in the world".

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) who was responsible for planning and co-ordinating rail services and crowd control at central London stations, with particular reference to Waterloo, on new year's eve; [104611]

(2) if he will hold an inquiry into the planning and management of crowd evacuation from central London railway stations, with particular reference to Waterloo, on New Year's Eve. [104605]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* A review of arrangements is an essential and routine part of any major event. All the organisations involved in key services on new year's eve already have them well in hand.

ATOC worked with each of the train operating companies, along with the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority, to plan and deliver the train services on millennium night into and out of central London stations, including Waterloo.

There were 250 police officers in the immediate vicinity of Waterloo specially tasked with crowd control and public safety (and supplemented by colleagues from elsewhere).

Environment Agency Chairman

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was spent by *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Environment Agency on headhunters in the process of finding a new Chairman for the Environment Agency. [105287]

Mr. Meacher: The appointment of a new Chairman for the Environment Agency is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, who has met all costs involved.

Recruitment consultants were employed to assist in finding a new Chairman. Headhunting was only a part of their duties and is not separately identifiable. The total cost of their work, including expenses, was £26,402.26 plus VAT. Advertisements were placed in the national press at an additional cost of £5,569 plus VAT.

Driving Licences

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 4W, on driving licences, if he will make a statement on the reasons for the use of private opticians. [105416]

Mr. Hill: The requirement for the provision of visual field charts is an expensive undertaking adding to the cost of the driving licence as well as creating customer service problems due to the waiting times in NHS out-patients clinics.

Private opticians have therefore been invited to provide the service. This will mean savings of £504,000 in a year on fees and will help to improve turnaround performance of applications where drivers are required to have their visual field tested.

Opticians will be providing reports within three weeks of request as opposed to three months for many hospital clinics.

Utilities

Mr. Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the result of his review of the contribution utilities should make to the cost of diverting their equipment for public transport schemes. [105675]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has reviewed the decision announced by the then Minister for Transport on 29 October 1998, following representations made to him and comments received during consultation earlier this year on draft regulations under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991.

Ministers have concluded that the earlier decision strikes a reasonable balance between the legitimate interests of the parties involved. I can therefore confirm that the utilities' contribution to diversionary works for "major transport works" (which as defined under the 1991 Act include rail based public transport schemes) will be reduced from 18 per cent. to 7.5 per cent., except that works that are of the nature of "major highways works" or "major bridge works" will continue to attract 18 per cent., whoever the works are done by.

I will shortly be laying regulations to implement this decision. The regulations will now come into effect after they have been laid and not from the date of the 1998 announcement, as stated at the time.

Alternative Fuels (HGVs)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of heavy goods vehicles run on alternative fuels. [105022]

Mr. Hill: DETR receives comprehensive data on the vehicle stock in Great Britain from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. These include the method of propulsion used to power vehicles. For those vehicles in the goods tax class at the end of June 1999, over 99 per cent. run on diesel. A further 0.7 per cent. run on petrol and less than 0.02 per cent. are recorded as running on other fuels.

Rail Franchises

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if the record of train operating companies in meeting punctuality and overcrowding targets will be taken into consideration when franchises for services are renewed; [105053]

(2) if he will make it a condition of awarding or extending rail franchises that passenger facilities including toilets, public telephones, CCTV, and park and ride, are provided at town centre railway stations. [105052]

Mr. Hill: The Franchising Director has been instructed by the Secretary of State to have regard to the prospects for greater investment when considering the replacement of franchises. In pursuit of these instructions the Franchising Director is paying close attention to prospective franchisees' proposals for improving all aspects of the customer experience, including station facilities, security and integrated transport measures.

In examining proposals for renegotiated, extended or new franchises, the Franchising Director has also been instructed to give due weight to the commitment of existing franchise operators to performance, efficiency and customer services.

Road Tolling

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce a toll on foreign heavy goods vehicles entering the UK. [105024]

Mr. Hill: Any tolling scheme, or any form of levy, would have to apply to domestic vehicles as well as foreign. To discriminate against foreign vehicles would be illegal under Community law. The Transport Bill currently before Parliament contains enabling powers for local authorities to introduce charging schemes on their roads, but there are no plans at present to introduce widespread charging on the trunk road network.

Vehicle Excise Duty

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of a reduction in vehicle excise duty for vehicles powered by alternative fuels. [105023]

Mr. Hill: The Government have taken a number of measures to promote the use of vehicles powered by alternative fuels. Gas powered lorries and buses already qualify for a vehicle excise duty concession of up to £1,000 and electrical vehicles are taxed at a concessionary rate of £40. The new graduated vehicle excise duty system for cars is being built in a flexible way which will allow scope to create additional incentives for vehicles using cleaner fuels and technology.

Motorway Services (Parking Fines)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what regulations govern the levying of fines in relation to parking at motorway service centres. [105055]

Mr. Hill: We require the operators of motorway service areas (MSAs) to provide up to two hours free parking for all types of vehicle. Operators are allowed to charge for longer stays but whether to levy a charge and, if so, how to enforce it against drivers who do not pay, are matters for the operator.

Train Punctuality

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to prevent train operating companies from extending journey times advertised in timetables to allow for delays. [105054]

Mr. Hill: Train Operating Companies (TOCs) must set their timetables within the framework of the Passenger Service Requirements (PSR). The PSR sets minimum service frequency, stations to be served, times of first and last trains and maximum journey times, based on the service provided by British Rail at the time of franchising. TOCs can alter the journey times of services but only within the maxima allowed in the PSR. Temporary dispensations may be granted to TOCs by the Franchising Director to extend journey times during periods of bad weather and at times such as the annual leaf fall in order to provide a reliable service to passengers.

British Rail Assets

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the criteria for the sale of residual assets of British Rail which retain a potential public transport use. [105328]

Mr. Hill: Following a review by the British Railways Board/shadow Strategic Rail Authority of its property portfolio, the Government have agreed with the Chairman of the sSRA new marketing procedures which give priority to transport use. Under these arrangements the rail industry, local authorities and other transport interests are being informed of all the properties that BRB/sSRA have available including those judged to be of future transport potential. They are also being given prior notification of the intention to market all sites as they come up for sale and have the opportunity to seek a delay in order to work up a bid. All sites are to be sold at open market value in order to protect the taxpayers' interest. Full details are in the BRB's "Marketing Process" document which is available in the House Library.

London Elections

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to lay orders under schedule 3 of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 before the House. [105283]

Mr. Hill: I signed the order identifying the constituency returning officers for the Greater London Authority elections on 17 December, and it came into force on 22 December (SI No3380). I will be making the election rules and laying the order setting limits on campaign expenses for the GLA elections in due course.

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions whom he has decided to appoint as the Greater London Returning Officer for the Greater London Authority election on 4 May. [105841]

Mr. Hill: I am proposing to make an Order appointing Robert Hughes CBE as the Greater London Returning Officer. Mr. Hughes was the Chief Counting Officer for the Greater London Referendum in May 1998. He has wide experience of running elections and knows London well.

Road Fund Licence (Enforcement)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people have been prosecuted since 1997 as a result of enforcement action taken by the Driving and Vehicle

Licensing Agency for possessing a vehicle without a road fund licence; and how much has been collected as a result of this action. [105285]

Mr. Hill: The numbers of vehicle excise duty offenders prosecuted by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency for the period in question, together with the revenue from penalties collected, is set out in the table. The table also shows the numbers of offenders who settled cases out of court and the penalty revenue collected.

	Number	*Revenue £ million*
Prosecutions		
1997–98	233,000	38.8
1998–99	256,300	45.4
1999–2000[1]	180,000	34.5
Out of Court Settlements		
1997–98	268,200	14.4
1998–99	218,800	12.5
1999–2000[1]	142,000	9.5

[1] April-December

Chrysotile Asbestos

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what initiatives have been taken by the Health and Safety Executive in relation to the marketing and use of Canadian chrysotile asbestos in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [104663]

Mr. Meacher: Canadian and other chrysotile asbestos has been banned. From 24 November 1999, Regulations prohibit the importation of chrysotile (white) asbestos and products containing it into the United Kingdom. They also prohibit the supply and use of chrysotile and its products within Great Britain. Comparable Regulations are expected shortly which will prohibit supply and use in Northern Ireland. A number of specialised safety-critical uses are temporarily permitted until safe substitutes have been developed.

Free Travel (Disabled People)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide free or low-cost travel for those with a disability. [105163]

Mr. Hill: Local authorities outside London are enabled by the Transport Act 1985 to provide concessionary travel schemes for their resident disabled people, and many do so. Similar arrangements apply in London under different legislation. Financial assistance is provided through the overall support given to local authority expenditure in general. I have no plans to change these arrangements so far as my own responsibilities are concerned. In Scotland this is a matter for Scottish Ministers.

All train operators are required to participate in the Disabled Persons Railcard which entitles holders to up to one third off a range of rail tickets.

Standard Spending Assessments

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress that his Department has made on its review of the local government standard spending assessment system. [104817]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The review of revenue grant distribution is well under way. Central and local government officials are jointly discussing a wide range of options for improving the method of distribution, and many councils have contributed their proposals. We have conducted an extensive survey of the opinions of members and officers and undertaken research into overseas distribution systems.

Decisions about the merits of the various options for reform will not be taken until we have consulted widely this summer.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the shortlist of proposed uses for the Millennium Dome after the millennium celebrations will be announced. [105842]

Ms Armstrong: The Government have announced the six proposals for the shortlist today. They are:

City of the Future, a theme park centred on the use of technology, proposed by Monex Leisure Ltd. and MEPC plc.

Dome Europe, a high technology leisure, business and retail destination, proposed by the Principal Finance Group of Nomura International plc.

Greenwich Media World, a high profile mixed use leisure and business destination focused on media and communications, proposed by a consortium comprising Pell Frischmann, London Merchant Securities, Sir Robert McAlpine, WestLB Panmure Ltd. and The Tussauds Group.

International Merchandise and Cultural Centre, a global one-stop shop for exchanging goods, services and tourism promotions, proposed by a consortium comprising Country Heights Holdings Berhad, Sunrise Berhad and Maccon Investment Holdings (Proprietary) Ltd.

Legacy plc, a high technology industrial campus of workspace, leisure and retail uses, proposed by Robert Bourne.

Sports Dome 2001, an advanced multiple sports facility, proposed by a consortium comprising John Taylor International Ltd., Chelsfield Plc, Collard Grosvenor and Price Nicholson.

The Dome has been instrumental in focusing regeneration activity on the Greenwich Peninsula and the Thames Gateway, and this is set to continue as a result of the response to this competition.

English Partnerships, the Government's regeneration agency, has transformed one of the largest tracts of derelict land in Europe, on the Greenwich Peninsula. The proposals emerging from this competition, together with other developments on the Peninsula and key public transport improvements, will take forward the major regeneration of this area.

I have placed details of the shortlisted proposals in the Libraries of the house.

Business Rates

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date it was decided that the consultation mechanism relating to business rating revaluation proposals in Wales should be transferred to the National Assembly for Wales from his Department; and on what date he announced this decision. [103738]

Mr. Hanson: I have been asked to reply.

The functions of the Secretary of State for Wales in respect of business rates in the Local Government Finance Act 1988 were transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999, by virtue of the National Assembly for Wales (Transfer of Functions) Order 1999 No. 672 which was approved by the House of Commons on 24 February 1999.

The process of consultation on various aspects of the business rating revaluation began before 1 July 1999 and was led by officials of the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions with Welsh Office involvement. On and after 1 July, the National Assembly for Wales continued to take part in the consultation process in place of the Welsh Office, relying on its powers in section 23(2) of the Government of Wales Act 1998 to continue anything being done by a Minister of the Crown in respect of a transferred function.

The UK Government did not need to make any formal decision or announcement about this, which was among the consequences of the approval by the House of the Transfer of Functions Order. It is one of many examples of work that continued in the transition from the Secretary of State to the National Assembly.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Developing Countries

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what plans he has to review the Government's options under trade agreements to safeguard access by developing countries to essential drugs; [104589]

(2) what plans he has to review Government policy on the trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights agreement and public health in developing countries. [104590]

Mr. Caborn: The Government are aware of concerns among some developing countries. However, the Government believe that there is nothing in the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement which undermines the ability of developing countries to provide appropriate healthcare. Although the Agreement came into effect in 1995, developing country members have only to implement its provisions from this year and the least developed countries do not have to implement until 2006. The effects, benefits and problems arising from the agreement have therefore yet to emerge.

A review of the implementation of the TRIPS agreement by WTO members will begin in June of this year and the Government will listen carefully to the views of other WTO members during the Review. It is, however, only in the context of a comprehensive new Round of negotiations that significant changes to the TRIPS agreement will be possible and it would be in that context that the Government would carry out a full review of their own policy.

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's policy on the extension of the deadline for complying with the provisions of the TRIPS Agreement applicable to developing countries and to countries whose economy is in transition. [104587]

Mr. Caborn: The Government believe that all signatories to the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights Agreement and other WTO agreements should fulfil their commitments in full and on time. They recognise, however, that some developing countries have genuine problems of capacity. In such cases, they would be ready to support alongside its EU partners sympathetic consideration in the relevant WTO Committee of a request for the extension of deadline, if this were accompanied by a work programme aimed at full implementation of the WTO agreement in question.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 31W, on the Ilisu Dam, if the representations from *(a)* the Syrian Ambassador and *(b)* the League of Arab States were (i) in favour and (ii) against the proposed dam. [105081]

Mr. Caborn: The Syrian Ambassador expressed concern that proper account had not been taken of the impact of the project on the Syrian economy, people and relations with Turkey or of legal obligations, and stressed the general sensitivity of water issues in the region.

The League of Arab States expressed concern at the lack of information and consultation on the project.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to make a decision on ECGD support for UK participation in the Ilisu Dam project. [104897]

Mr. Caborn: The application for ECGD support for the UK participation in the Ilisu Dam project has given rise to a number of social, political, environmental and cultural issues requiring further consideration between ECGD, the other export credit agencies involved, the Turkish authorities and the contractors. We will only agree support if these issues are addressed to our satisfaction. In any event no decision on support will be made until a revised Environmental Impact Assessment has been produced. This is expected in late March or April.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104019]

Mr. Byers: In April 1999 the numbers of men and women employed in DTI Headquarters by age group were as follows:

Age	*Men*	*Women*	*Total*
16–19	1	5	6
20–24	36	41	77
25–29	204	247	451
30–34	414	450	864
35–39	486	356	842

Age	Men	Women	Total
40–44	389	243	632
45–49	405	203	608
50+	658	296	954
Total	2,593	1,841	4,434

The Department's personnel database was set up in 1985 and does not include data on staff who left the Department before that date; full data on the age profile of staff in 1979 is not therefore available. However, the annual publication, "Civil Service Statistics", provides a departmental breakdown of staff by gender and Service-wide data by age for that year. In addition the Equal Opportunities Data Summary 1998 provides average age by responsibility level and gender across the Service.

The figures exclude DTI staff in Government Offices and the DTI's Executive Agencies who have delegated responsibility for personnel issues.

GATT

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the Government's assessment of the outcome of the Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations, including the conclusions it has drawn concerning future trade negotiations. [104358]

Mr. Caborn: An assessment of the outcome of the Uruguay Round of GATT negotiations was published in May 1994 by the Government in a White Paper, "The Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations 1986–94" (Cm 2579). In relation to future trade negotiations, the Government published a consultation paper in May 1999 entitled "The UK and the World Trade Organisation: An Introduction to the Next Round" (DTI/Pub4140/5k/5/99/NP. URN 99/875). Both documents are available in the Libraries of both Houses. The Government's position in supporting the launch of a comprehensive Round of trade negotiations has been discussed in Parliament, most recently in the debate in European Standing Committee C on 22 November 1999. The Government's position is well reflected in the position of the EU and its support for the launch of a comprehensive Round remains strong since the failure of the Seattle Conference, as the Secretary of State said in the debate in the House on 9 December 1999, *Official Report,* columns 1022–94.

Early Retirement

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many employees of his Department took early retirement packages, and at what total cost, in the financial year 1996–97. [104099]

Mr. Byers: Two hundred and twenty seven employees took early retirement packages at a cost of some £1.4 million in the financial year 1996–97. This represents 20 per cent. of the costs, the other 80 per cent. being met by the Treasury under the 80:20 Scheme in force at the time.

Match Funding

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much was allocated from the social and regional funds of the European Union to the United Kingdom during the 1999 financial year; what was the value of match funding from United Kingdom sources; and from what sources these match funds were derived. [105124]

Mr. Caborn: Allocations from the European Union's Structural Funds relate to multiannual programmes. Expenditure must be committed within the programme period, but may be spent up to two years after the end of the period. There are therefore no allocations for specific years, and expenditure during 1999 would be in the context of programmes approved during the 1994–99 financing period with expenditure allowed until the end of 2001.

The level of match funding varies from programme to programme. The sources of match funding will depend on the nature of the many individual projects. It is the responsibility of applicants for funding to identify the sources of match funding for their projects. Programme secretariats can advise on this. There are many potential sources, e.g. central government, local authorities, the voluntary and private sectors. No central records exist of the sources of match funding used for individual projects.

World Trade Organisation

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if it is the Government's policy to support the expansion of the World Trade Organisation's remit to cover negotiations on *(a)* investment, *(b)* Government procurement and *(c)* guidelines for the behaviour of multinational enterprises. [105062]

Mr. Caborn: It remains Government policy to support a comprehensive round of negotiations in the WTO, including investment and government procurement. The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises are currently under review in the OECD with particular focus on their more effective implementation and wider dissemination. We believe that the review of the Guidelines will make them of greater relevance and use for business, other organisations and governments alike.

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals his Department has in respect of the World Trade Organisation to enable multilateral trade agreements to work in concert with multilateral environmental agreements. [105060]

Mr. Caborn: At the recent WTO Ministerial conference in Seattle, the UK and the EU pressed for a new Round of trade negotiations to include a clarification of the relationship between WTO rules and trade measures taken within multilateral environmental agreements. The Seattle conference was suspended without agreement on the terms for a new Round, but we continue to press for this subject to be included in future WTO negotiations.

Glassmaking

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what applications for *(a)* grant or *(b)* other financial support he has received for a glass factory to be operated in the north west of England by Quinn Glass. [104767]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Any applications are commercially confidential, it is therefore not possible for me to provide this information.

Plutonium Fuel

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the relevant Swiss electricity company and the Swiss nuclear regulatory authorities in respect of problems discovered with MOX plutonium fuel exported to Switzerland from Sellafield. [104698]

Mrs. Liddell: None. This is a matter for the companies and the national regulatory authorities concerned.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 235W, on plutonium fuel, if he is in a position to make public the details of the remedial measures being put in place to rectify safety management problems in MOX nuclear fuel manufacture at Sellafield; and what further meetings he has had with the HSE (N11) on this matter since 1 December 1999. [104726]

Mrs. Liddell: The work to address the issues associated with the falsification of quality assurance data at BNFL's MOX Demonstration Facility at Sellafield is still continuing. As I made clear in my reply of 16 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 235W, I have asked the company to make public details of the remedial measures being taken as soon as possible, consistent with the need to address these matters thoroughly and to satisfy the HSE fully as to the adequacy of the company's proposals. On 15 December 1999, I received a briefing from HSE's Chief Inspector of Nuclear Installations on progress with HSE's independent investigation into this matter. I understand HSE intend to publish a report on their findings next month.

Assisted Area Status

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 7 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 457W, concerning eligibility of wards for assisted area status in Dumfries and Galloway, what is the nature of the personal information referred to in his answer. [104419]

Mr. Caborn: Some of the information used in identifying areas of significant labour market weakness is confidential as it was collected under the provisions of the Statistics of Trade Act 1947, in particular the manufacturing activity within wards.

Independent Assessment Panel

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the membership of the Independent Assessment Panel for the Partnership Fund. [105515]

Mr. Alan Johnson: An independent Assessment Panel of nine members is to recommend to Ministers which projects should receive funding in the first round of the £5 million Partnership Fund.

The nine members of the Assessment Panel—three trade unionists, three industrialists and three independent experts—will report to Ministers who will then make the final decisions on which projects have been successful. The successful applicants for funding under the Partnership Fund will be announced in Spring 2000.

Appointments are for a period of one year renewable for up to four years from 20 December 1999. Members are unpaid although travel and subsistence expenses are available.

The members of the Assessment Panel are:

Ms Yvonne Bennion, Policy Specialist at the Industrial Society

Mr. David Coats, Head of Economic and Social Affairs Department at the TUC

Mr. Bill Connor, General Secretary of USDAW

Mr. Willy Coupar (Chairman of the Panel), Director of the IPA

Mrs. Lesley James, formerly HR Director of Tesco plc.

Mr. Mike Kinski, Group Chief Executive of Stagecoach Holdings plc.

Dr. Clive Morton OBE, Business Development Director at Anglian Water

Mrs. Margaret Prosser OBE, Deputy General Secretary of TGWU

Mr. John Stevens, Director of Development & Public Policy at the IPD

Brief biographies of the members of the Panel have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

Electricity Industry

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the Government's target date for replacing the UK electricity pool system. [105421]

Mrs. Liddell: The target for the implementation of the new electricity trading arrangements is autumn 2000.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment his Department has made of the impact on the electricity pool price of the fire at Drax Power Station in December; and if he will make a statement on the related discussions he has had with the industry on this subject. [105420]

Mrs. Liddell: As a result of a fire at Drax power station on 27 December I understand that part of the output of the station will be unavailable for a period. It is not uncommon for some generating plants to be unavailable for technical reasons and there is adequate generating capacity available on the system to cover such incidents. The incident at Drax affected only around 1 per cent. of the available generation on the England and Wales system and the impact on Pool prices is small.

Nuclear Fuel

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the decision by the Japanese electricity company Kansai Electric Power to return nuclear fuel to Britain. [105266]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have noted Kansai Electric's statement of 10 January that they will ask BNFL to return the eight fuel assemblies at the Takahama 4 reactor to the UK. This raises a number of issues which

will need to be explored by the Japanese and UK Governments before Kansai and BNFL reach any conclusions.

Part-time Work Directive

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the implementation of the Part-time Work Directive. [105542]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I am today publishing a consultation document setting out the Government's proposals for implementing the Part-time Work Directive by means of regulations giving part-timers the right to be treated no less-favourably than comparable full-timers. The consultation lasts until 27 February, and I expect to lay Regulations soon afterwards.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sudan

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans the Government have to help alleviate suffering in Sudan. [104359]

Mr. Foulkes: This financial year we have pledged £8 million to respond to humanitarian needs in Sudan. Though suffering in the country is not as severe as during the crisis of 1998 we are following the situation closely. Ending the war is the key to alleviating the suffering in Sudan and we are working hard with our international partners to support the current peace efforts sponsored by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what reports she has received concerning religious discrimination in Government-run peace camps in Southern Sudan. [104367]

Mr. Foulkes: The Peace Camps or Peace Villages set up by the Government of Sudan in the Nuba Mountain region have been accused of being part of the Government's alleged aim of islamisation of the people. However, given the scarcity of information from that region we are unable to determine the true situation. Last year's United Nations assessment mission to the region did not identify religious discrimination as a problem, but the subject was not part of the mission's terms of reference.

Ethiopia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many applications for aid have been made by non-Governmental organisations concerning aid projects in Ethiopia; and how many have been *(a)* accepted and *(b)* rejected. [104679]

Mr. Foulkes: During the current financial year, DFID has received 10 applications from NGOs for humanitarian aid projects. Five of these have been accepted, four rejected, and one is currently under consideration.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement concerning the current humanitarian situation in Ethiopia and Eritrea. [104677]

Mr. Foulkes: In Ethiopia, recent estimates by the Government of Ethiopia, endorsed by the World Food Programme, give a total of 6.9 million people in need of food aid assistance due to adverse weather. An additional 385,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), from the war zone in the border area disputed with Eritrea, are also in need of assistance.

In Eritrea, the results of the conflict with Ethiopia are the principal cause of the present humanitarian situation. Those affected include 250,000 IDPs, a similar number of war-affected (mainly those households who have taken in IDPs) and 64,000 people who have been deported from Ethiopia. There are also some rural areas which are drought affected, and FAO is currently conducting a survey with the Eritrean Ministry of Agriculture to assess the extent of this problem.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment her Department has made concerning the drought conditions in Ethiopia. [104678]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development (DFID) relies on the assessments of the United Nations, the Government of Ethiopia, NGOs and USAID in monitoring the drought conditions in Ethiopia. We do not seek to duplicate the work of these organisations. We employ a Field Manager in Addis Ababa who regularly participates in joint assessment missions with the Ethiopian Government and other donors, participates in food aid co-ordination meetings and visits areas identified for potential DFID assistance. The official is backed up by regular visits from a senior natural resources adviser based in London.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her Department's policy on the provision of development aid to *(a)* Ethiopia and *(b)* Sudan. [104676]

Mr. Foulkes: The UK is completing current commitments in Ethiopia and continuing to provide humanitarian assistance but will not agree any new funding proposals until the war with Eritrea has ended.

UK Development Aid to Sudan ceased in January 1991. Substantial humanitarian assistance to Sudan has continued since then.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what response her Department has made to the Ethiopian Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission's appeal, entitled Emergency Relief Needs in Ethiopia-January-March 2000. [104681]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development's (DFID) policy is to channel emergency food relief through NGOs or UN agencies.

Current and planned projects which are relevant to this Appeal are as follows:

DFID has recently approved a £1.1 million project for provision of 3,000 metric tonnes (mt) of emergency food aid to Konso, in the southern region of Ethiopia. This will be distributed between

January and April 2000, through a project implemented by the British NGO, FARM Africa, in collaboration with Ethiopian local government agencies.

We are already funding a 3,000 mt food aid intervention in Koisha, southern region, which runs to the end of January.

DFID is presently reviewing a proposal for a further 6,240 mt of food aid to be distributed through an NGO project in Wollo, Amhara Region.

We are also contributing indirectly through EU food aid commitments.

Chrysotile Asbestos

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action is taken by the Government to ensure that developing countries are aware of the hazards of chrysotile asbestos and to discourage the dumping of this product in developing and third-world countries; and if she will make a statement. [104662]

Clare Short: Regulations prohibiting the import of chrysotile asbestos into the UK came into force in November 1999, meeting an EU Directive that requires all member states to introduce legislation banning asbestos by 1 January 2005.

We will support the European Commission's intention to propose to the Rotterdam Convention's Interim Chemical Review Committee (ICRC) that the remaining asbestos fibres, including chrysotile, be added to Annexe 111 (Chemicals subject to the PIC Procedure) of the Convention. If the ICRC are content, then the proposal will be discussed later this year by the Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee that negotiated the Convention.

Tropical Diseases

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with pharmaceutical companies on the financing of research to combat leishmaniasis and other sand-fly related diseases affecting poor people who sleep close to their cattle. [104422]

Clare Short: I have had no discussions with pharmaceutical companies on the financing of research to combat leishmaniasis or other sand-fly related diseases. We support research through the World Health Organisation's Tropical Disease Research Programme, which places great emphasis on forming partnerships with pharmaceutical companies to facilitate future drug development. Current treatment for leishmaniasis involves repeated injections, and is not effective in all cases. No oral treatment is currently available, although trials are underway.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what research reports she has received directed to the spread of malaria among people living in highland areas and its relationship with climate change; and if she will make a statement. [104664]

Clare Short: We are concerned at the potential spread of malaria into tropical highlands. Current scientific evidence is far from unanimous on the relationship with climate change. We are working with research institutes and ministries of health in affected countries to develop reliable systems for epidemic prediction, detection and response.

SCOTLAND

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104025]

Dr. Reid: The following figures illustrate the number of staff in the core Scottish Office departments at 1 April 1999.

Number of staff at 1 April 1999

Full-time equivalent

Age band	*Men*	*Women*	*All staff*
16–19	28.0	30.0	58.0
20–24	122.0	111.6	233.6
25–29	202.0	232.5	434.5
30–34	258.8	244.2	503.0
35–39	266.6	261.1	527.7
40–44	310.7	261.8	572.5
45–49	319.0	235.3	554.3
50 or over	512.7	310.2	822.9
Total	2,019.8	1,686.7	3,706.5

There are no comparable figures available for April 1979. However, some information may be found in Civil Service Statistics which is published annually and is available in the Library.

Asset Sales

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the items in the National Assets Register sold by his Department since 8 March 1999, stating in each case the amount of money realised; if he will estimate the total amount raised from such sales to date; and if he will make a statement. [104498]

Dr. Reid: Those assets owned by The Scottish Office and its Executive Agencies listed in the National Asset Register which have been sold between 8 March 1999 to 30 June 1999 are as follows, together with the money realised:

	Proceeds realised £
The Scottish Office core fixed assets	
Highland and Lowland Estates:	
Lowland Estate	111,650
Highland Estate	14,505
Furniture and Fittings	935
IT Systems	30
Vehicles	42,929
Executive Agencies of The Scottish Office	
Scottish Prison Service	
Vehicles	17,974
Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency	
Vehicles	6,109
Scottish Agricultural Science Agency	
Plant and Machinery	1,765
Fisheries Research Services	
Vehicles	3,478
Student Awards Agency for Scotland	
IT Systems	25
Total	199,400

From 1 July 1999, The Scotland Office has not sold any assets.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Equal Opportunities

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps have been taken to create an Equality Unit within the Northern Ireland Office to co-ordinate the work relating to equality schemes of United Kingdom departments and other bodies designated by the Secretary of State under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. [103814]

Mr. George Howarth: The Human Rights Unit in the Northern Ireland Office advises the Secretary of State on all issues relating to equality schemes for which the Secretary of State is responsible.

The Equality Commission is required by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to produce statutory guidelines on equality schemes (subject to approval by the Secretary of State) and these guidelines will be given to all public authorities designated under section 75. United Kingdom Government Departments and other bodies designated by the Secretary of State under section 75 will submit their equality schemes to the Commission for approval. The Secretary of State is responsible for approving public authority equality schemes which have been referred to him by the Equality Commission. The Commission cannot refer the equality schemes of United Kingdom Government Departments to the Secretary of State.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what provision has been made within the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that it, and the voluntary and community sectors with which it works, have been provided with sufficient resources to ensure that they are able to comply with the statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity. [103815]

Mr. George Howarth: No additional financial resources have been provided to ensure that the Northern Ireland Office and the voluntary and community sectors with whom it works are able to comply with the statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity. However the Government believes that these public authorities have sufficient resources to ensure that they are able to comply with the statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity.

Criminal Justice Review

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will make a statement on the reasons why the report of the Criminal Justice Review established under the terms of the Good Friday agreement has not yet been published; and when he expects it to be published. [103816]

Mr. Ingram: The extended consultation process which the Review Group engaged in, together with the range and complexity of the issues which the Group was invited to address, meant that the analytical phase of their work began later and has taken longer than the Group expected. I understand, however, that the report is now at an advanced stage of preparation and that it is hoped to publish it as soon as possible.

PRIME MINISTER

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Prime Minister what subjects have been referred to the Performance and Innovation Unit. [104591]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answers I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, Central (Mr. Illsley) on 10 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 277–78W; to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on 21 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 630W; and to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 162W.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Prime Minister what is the remit of the Performance and Innovation Unit. [104592]

The Prime Minister: The remit of the Performance and Innovation Unit is to improve the capacity of Government to identify and address strategic, cross-cutting issues and promote innovation in the development of policy and in the delivery of the Government's objectives.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Prime Minister (1) when he expects the Performance and Innovation Unit to report on post offices; [104593]

(2) what is the membership and remit of the Performance and Innovation Unit study of post offices. [104594]

The Prime Minister: As I indicated in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on 21 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 630W, I expect the Performance and Innovation Unit's work on the Post Office network to be completed this spring.

The Performance and Innovation Unit project team is drawn from both inside and outside Government, to ensure new thinking and a wide range of experience is brought to bear on the issues. The remit of the project is to identify the contribution made by post offices to the vitality of local communities, consider how the Post Office network can best contribute to the Government's objectives in the future and the process to formulate objectives for the Post Office.

Fundamental Rights Draft Charter

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish documents sent to the European Union Fundamental Rights Charter Drafting Body; when he expects the Charter Drafting Body to consider a draft; and how the Government will consult *(a)* Parliament and *(b)* the public on this draft. [105126]

The Prime Minister: The Charter drafting process is designed to be transparent. The Charter website, which will contain the various working documents, can be reached through http://ue.eu.int. Parliament will also have access to all the papers through its two delegates. In addition, the meetings of the Charter drafting body are televised.

Drafting will probably begin after the next plenary on 1–2 February, which will be the first opportunity for a general discussion of the substance.

The Government have already written to the Chairs of the two Scrutiny Committees about the process and will continue to liaise closely with Parliament. The Government will also continue to consult NGOs and other independent organisations and individuals through a combination of meetings and correspondence.

Golden Jubilee

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Prime Minister what plans Her Majesty's Government have to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne. [104809]

The Prime Minister: Planning for The Queen's Golden Jubilee is at a very early stage. A programme of celebrations will be announced in due course.

Hospitality

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Prime Minister how much was spent on official entertaining at 10 Downing Street in the periods *(a)* 1 May 1997 to 31 March 1998 and *(b)* 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999. [104885]

The Prime Minister: The total cost to my office of official hospitality, including official entertainment, at 10 Downing Street and Chequers in 1997–98 and 1998–99 was as follows:

1997–98: £43,777
1998–99: £53,639

This compares with total expenditure on entertainment at 10 Downing Street during 1996–97 of £50,126.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he has had with the President of Syria on the construction of the Ilisu Dam. [105453]

The Prime Minister: I have had no discussion with the President of Syria on the construction of the Ilisu Dam.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the impact of the construction of the Ilisu Dam on the Kurdish People. [105451]

The Prime Minister: A report, "Stakeholders' Attitudes to Involuntary Resettlement in the Context of the Ilisu Dam Project in Turkey" has been prepared by an independent social development expert following a visit to the region to ascertain the views of the local population likely to be affected by the dam. Copies of this report are in the Libraries of both Houses.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister which EU states have joined with the UK Government in providing financial support for the construction of the Ilisu Dam. [105450]

The Prime Minister: No financial support has yet been provided by any EU state for the construction of the Ilisu Dam.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had with the Heads of Government of the EU at Helsinki on the future of the Ilisu Dam. [105452]

The Prime Minister: I have had no discussion with the Heads of Government of the EU on the future of the Ilisu Dam.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had with the Turkish Prime Minister at the Helsinki Summit concerning the construction of the Ilisu Dam; and if he will make a statement. [105477]

The Prime Minister: I have had no discussion with the Turkish Prime Minister on the construction of the Ilisu Dam.

Members' Interests

Mr. Maude: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the compliance of the Financial Secretary to the Treasury with the Ministerial Code in relation to his shares declared in the Register of Members' Interests. [105288]

The Prime Minister: Guidance to Ministers on the handling of financial interests is set out in section 9 of the Ministerial Code.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Youth Support Service

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish the prospectus for the new youth support service. [105352]

Mr. Wicks: We shall be publishing shortly a document to announce the key functions that we expect the new youth support service to perform. We expect to publish a specification for tender for the new service in March.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with other Government Departments regarding continuity of funding for services to be provided under the proposed arrangements for the combined Youth Support Service. [104696]

Mr. Wicks: We are working closely with other Government departments, to identify the contributions which their existing services will make to the Youth Support Service. This includes the funding which will be available. An inter-departmental steering group has been set up to assist in this process, which has met a number of times. Funding for the Youth Support Service will be settled as part of the Government's Year 2000 spending review.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each regional development agency *(a)* the amounts granted and *(b)* the companies facing closure or large-scale redundancies to which the sums have been allocated under the rapid response scheme. [104811]

Mr. Wicks: The information requested is contained in the following table. Where no money has been awarded in a particular region this is because no firm proposals have been received.

Rapid Response Fund: companies supported since 1998–99

RDA	*Company/ies*	*Amount granted £*
One North East	Electrolux	51,000
	Fujitsu	415,000
	Groves Cranes	250,000
	Onwa	153,000
	R.J.B. Ellington	58,650
	Siemens	300,000
	Vaux	140,000
	Wilkinson Sword	120,000
Total		1,487,650
Advantage West Midlands	Lear, Alvis, Abbey Textiles, Alstrom, Massey Ferguson and AP Leamington (all Coventry and Warwickshire)	75,000
	IMI Refineries Walsall	10,000
	Michelin	Bid to be received
	Rover	740,000
	Staff Ceramics—4 firms	268,000
	Telford—4 firms	[1]50,000
East of England Development Agency	Hazelwood Foods	50,000
	United Distillers Vintners	61,000
Total		111,000
East Midlands Development Agency	Alstom Turbines	57,000
	Bryan Donkin Foundry	23,444
	RJB Calberton/Harworth	89,500
	Ladybird and Jarvis Porter	44,985
	Laporte Industries	56,000
	Midland Mining Annesley Bentinck	177,750
Total		448,579
South West of England Development Agency	Hoechst Trespephan	125,250
	Link Group	48,000
	Rover Group (Swindon)	16,764
	Strachen Henshaw	148,100
Total		338,114
London Development Partnership	—	0
North West Development Agency	—	0
South East of England Development Agency	—	0
Yorkshire Forward2	—	0
Grand total TBC		3,528,343

[1] Up to £170,000 if needed

School Attendance

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what support has been given to schools to reduce the level of unauthorised absences. [104119]

Jacqui Smith: Our objective is to reduce the learning time lost due to truancy and exclusion by one third by year 2002. Over three years we are investing £500 million across England on projects tackling truancy and school exclusion, and other initiatives to get children back into school and learning. Projects supported include the purchasing of electronic equipment to monitor attendance, additional staff to chase-up truants, and reward schemes for acknowledging regular attendance. We are also encouraging schools to set up pupil mentoring schemes and to develop home-school liaison through the implementation of home-school agreements. All of these activities are designed to help schools reduce unauthorised absence.

On 1 November 1999 we issued our strategy document "Tackling Truancy Together" which sets out our further proposals for helping to reduce unauthorised absence from school. We are currently considering the many responses we received to the proposals in that document, and will make an announcement soon on what further action we want to take to help reduce unauthorised absence from school.

Minster College, Isle of Sheppey

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the withdrawal by Kent County Council of match funding from the Single Regeneration Budget funded Inclusion Unit at Minster College on the Isle of Sheppey. [105200]

Ms Estelle Morris: I understand that discussions are continuing between Kent Local Education Authority and Minster College about the future of the Inclusion Unit at the School. I have asked my officials to keep in touch with the discussions and will write to you as soon as possible with further details.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the changes to the Standard Fund Grant 19 and their impact on match funding for the Single Regeneration Budget funded Inclusion Unit at Minster College on the Isle of Sheppey. [105201]

Ms Estelle Morris: Kent Local Education Authority's Standards Fund Grant 19 allocation for secondary schools and LEA initiatives has been increased from £950,000 in 1999–2000 to £2.8 million for 2000–01. Nearly £2.2 million of the grant must be devolved directly to Kent secondary schools and colleges to help combat truancy and exclusions. Kent are consulting on how the funds will be distributed. I understand that discussions are continuing between Kent Local Education Authority and Minster College about the future of their Inclusion Unit. I have asked my officials to keep in touch with the discussions and will write to you as soon as possible with further details.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will take steps to secure the future of the Inclusion Unit at Minster College on the Isle of Sheppey. [105202]

Ms Estelle Morris: I understand that discussions are continuing between Kent Local Education Authority and Minster College about the future of the Inclusion Unit at the school. I have asked my officials to keep in touch with the discussions and I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible with further details.

Sixth Forms

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the cost to English local education authorities of maintaining sixth forms in schools in the last year for which figures are available. [105351]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Standard Spending Assessment mechanism includes an unhypothecated element for post-16 education. Information on the cost to local education authorities of maintaining sixth forms in schools is not collected.

New Deal (Monitoring)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what methods are used to monitor the quality of training services provided under the New Deal by private sector companies. [104103]

Ms Jowell: In line with our continuing commitment for ensuring quality, the Employment Service has worked in partnership with the Training Standards Council (TSC) to develop a framework for the assessment of the quality of New Deal training provision. By March 2002, every New Deal Unit of Delivery will have been inspected by the Council. This framework is the basis for each New Deal partnership to carry out an annual self assessment. These inspections and self-assessments cover the quality of all training provision including that delivered by the private sector.

Disabled People

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding he will make available to enable schools and colleges to improve facilities for people with disabilities. [104272]

Ms Hodge: We have significantly increased the funding available under the Schools Access Initiative to enable local education authorities to improve access to mainstream schools and the curriculum for pupils with disabilities. We recently announced that £30 million will be available in the 2000–01 financial year. This is a 50 per cent. increase on the previous year's level of funding and 200 per cent. increase on funds available in 1996–97. We expect to allocate £100 million for access schemes in the three years to 2002.

In the Further Education sector the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC) funding methodology allows for additional units of funding, to be allocated to support provision for students with disabilities, or learning difficulties. This is used to fund a range of support for individual students, including care assistants and signers. In addition, £12 million capital funding has been allocated over three years (1999–2000, 2000–01, 2001–02) specifically to improve access and facilities for students with learning difficulties and or disabilities. Capital projects supported under the general widening participation and skills agenda will also have the potential to improve access for disabled students. Responsibility for funding of further education will pass to the Learning and Skills Council from April 2001 and a consultation document on the new Council's funding arrangements will be issued early in 2000.

Improving access and facilities for disabled people in education was a key feature of the recommendations of the Disability Rights Task Force, who published their report "From Exclusion to Inclusion" in December 1999. We will be introducing legislation later this session to address its recommendations for education and consider longer term costs as part of the Year 2000 Spending Review.

Careers Service

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the TUPE regulations will apply to staff in the Careers Service as a result of the creation of the new combined arrangements for the Youth Support Service. [104697]

Mr. Wicks: Decisions have yet to be taken about the structure of the Youth Support Service and how Careers Service companies will be affected. It is therefore too early to consider the extent to which TUPE regulations will apply to Careers Service staff. We indicated in the White Paper "Learning to Succeed" that the best of the Careers Service companies will play a major role in the new Service together with a range of other local partners. We have established a Transitional Issues Group with Careers Service National Association (CSNA) that will be considering the implications for Careers Service companies and providing them with guidance.

School Headships

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many school headships in each London Borough are held by *(a)* men and *(b)* women from an ethnic minority background. [104796]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not held centrally.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy that metropolitan boroughs eligible for EU Objective One status on account of their poverty and social deprivation do not receive per pupil education standard spending assessment allocations below the national average. [104838]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government announced in November 1998 a three year review in partnership with local government to look for a way of distributing revenue support grant which is simpler, more stable, more robust and fairer than the present arrangements for SSAs. While the review is taking place there will be no further changes to the method of distributing funding.

New Deal

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with the Office for National Statistics with regard to the production of an assessment of each of the New Deal programmes; and if he will make a statement. [102101]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* Officials from both the Department for Education and Employment and the Office for National Statistics liaise regularly to discuss and analyse the impact that New Deal programmes have had on unemployment figures and other economic indicators published by the Office for National Statistics. Evaluation is carried out independently by outside contractors and the Department's internal analysis and monitoring uses Government Statistical Service figures and internal data.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many letters have been sent to lone parents inviting them to participate in the New Deal for Lone Parents. [102103]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* From the national introduction of the New Deal for Lone Parents on 26 October 1998, to the end of October 1999, initial invitation letters were sent to 434,570 lone parents.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his latest assessment of substitution, dead-weight and displacement in each of the New Deal schemes. [102107]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* There is a comprehensive evaluation programme in place for all elements of New Deal. The article "New Deal for the young unemployed: monitoring and evaluation", published in Labour Market Trends in November 1998, sets out a framework which is broadly common across New Deal. We are committed to publishing the final reports of all these evaluations.

New Deal is a long term initiative, still in its early days. Consequently, most evaluation is also still in progress and is yet to report. However, Employment Service Research report ESR33, published in December 1999 and available in the Library, provides an independent assessment, by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR), of the effects of the New Deal for Young People in its first year. This provides encouraging evidence of the early impact of the New Deal. On deadweight it found that

> "Approximately 50 per cent. of individuals leaving unemployment via the NDYP would have done so in absence of the programme".

and that this

> "is broadly in line with estimates from other active labour market programmes".

On substitution and displacement it found that

> "NDYP does not appear to have had any significant effect on unemployment of others than the client group so far".

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many persons have left their New Deal scheme to be placed on *(a)* Incapacity Benefit, *(b)* Income Support, *(c)* Jobseeker's Allowance and *(d)* any other benefit. [102109]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 9 December 1999]:* Our management information on those who leave New Deal to claim benefit is only broken down to those who return to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and those who claimed another benefit. In the period ending October 1999, of the 251,600 people who left the New Deal for Young People; 23,680 claimed JSA and 30,060 claimed another benefit.

Education Initiatives

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what were (i) the total number of contracts covered by his answer of 23 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 691–92W, (ii) the number and total value of those contracts that have been put out to competitive tender, (iii) the number and total value of those contracts that have not been put out to competitive tender and (iv) the names of all companies with which contracts not put out to competitive tender have been concluded. [99116]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 22 November 1999]:* There were 65 commercial contracts relating to the previous answer. 26 contracts, at a total value of £4.4 million were put out to competitive tender, and 39 contracts at a value of £709,000 were not put out to competitive tender. The remaining expenditure on consultants and advisers were for individuals and organisations working with the Department on a non-commercial basis. Where commercial contracts were not put out to competitive tender the contracts relate to the organisations or individuals listed, engaged due to their known specialist expertise. Some may have more than one contract.

Cheshire Education Services
C. & P. Partnership
Wilfred Agnew
Barry Allsop
Norman Barlow
Richard Brake
Terry Browne
Margaret Caister
Ian Clelland
Professor Bernard Crick
Joan Farrelly
Mike Fielding
Pamela Francis
Roger Frost
Arthur Giles
George Gill OBE
Ann Gittins
Joan Greenfield
Bill Greenwood
Malcolm Hewitt
Peter Highfield
Penny Holden
Pat Ivin
Jane Jinks
Diane Kelly
Dee Kushlick-Williams
Professor Hugh Lawlor
Hilary MacDonald
Helen McMaster
Ivan McNally
Denis Mongon
Judith Morris
Ian Pollard
Merlin Price
Alan Puckey
Peter Rabbett
Ian Shelton
Monica Timmis
Sir Anthony Tippet

Gail Treml
Tony Webster
Jeff White
Sylvia Wright

CABINET OFFICE

On-line Services

Helen Jones: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she intends to publish information on the target set by the Prime Minister to deliver 25 per cent. of Government services electronically. [105516]

Marjorie Mowlam: A report on progress by Departments and their key agencies was published recently. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of the House and it was published on the website www.citu.gov.uk/25percent.menu.htm. The report contains information supplied by Departments on a sample of key dealings between the citizen and business and Government.

DEFENCE

Live Munitions Testing

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what assessment was made by his Department of the impact on fishing activity prior to the testing of live cluster bombs in Luce Bay; [104356]

(2) what plans he has to use live munitions in future trials in *(a)* Luce Bay and *(b)* elsewhere around the Scottish coast; [104353]

(3) for what reason live cluster bombs were used in recent trials at Luce Bay, Wigtownshire; [104354]

(4) what assessment was made by his Department of the prospects for recovery of bombs, prior to the testing of live cluster bombs in Luce Bay; and if he will make a statement. [104355]

Mr. Spellar: The trials at Luce Bay that took place over Easter last year were an urgent operational requirement in direct support of the UK participation in the NATO action in Kosovo. Live variants of the cluster bomb were used because there were insufficient inert bombs available to complete the trials within the required timescale. Although these weapons contained live bomblets, they were configured in such a manner as not to deploy the bomblets in flight.

Before any trial is approved a detailed series of risk assessments and defined controlled operating procedures are required. In addition, prior to the Luce Bay trial options for the recovery, disposal and containment of the bombs were all considered. The final decision to contain the bombs on the seabed was made once the trial has been completed and the situation assessed. The impact area within the licensed danger area of the Luce Bay range was selected on the basis that no significant fishing activity was regularly carried out in that area. The exact location was selected using the experience and judgment of the West Freugh Range and Ground Control Officers, who have between them more than 38 years of experience of monitoring all activities which emanate from the range.

In common with other test and evaluation ranges in the UK the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency's Luce Bay range is formally licensed for trials involving the use of live ordnance, and operates in accordance with the local byelaws governing its use. Whilst the majority of the trials conducted in the Luce Bay area and elsewhere around the Scottish coast are achieved wherever possible using inert material, there will inevitably be requirements in the future for trials using live ordnance to support the effectiveness of the United Kingdom armed services, sometimes at short notice. All trials, whether using live or inert weapons are subject to the same stringent controls and procedures to ensure the safe operation of all such activities.

Service Personnel (Health)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many personnel in each of the three armed services are currently classified as category P7R, unfit for operational duty. [104924]

Mr. Spellar: The medical category P7, with or without the "R" suffix, denotes fitness for specific types of light duties in the Royal Navy or Army. The RAF equivalent is known as Medical Employment Standard (MES) Z 5 (Temp). The "R" suffix with P7 may be used at the discretion of medical officers as an indication that the patient is expected to return to full fitness within a maximum period of up to 18 months.

The three Services maintain statistics on medical downgrading in slightly different ways to reflect their requirements. P7R figures, where available, for each of the Services as at 12 January 2000 are as follows:

Royal Navy

Medical Category P7R—1,535 (Ratings only) Figures for Officers not held centrally.

Army

Medical Category P7—2,019 (Officers and other ranks).

Note:

It is not possible to ascertain the number within this category that may also have been designated "R" as this information is not recorded centrally.

RAF

Medical Category MES Z 5(Temp)—1,786 Officers and other ranks)

Wilkinson Sword of Peace

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the units of the armed services that have been awarded the Wilkinson Sword of Peace in each year since its inception, indicating the aspect of community relations recognised in the award. [105457]

Mr. Spellar: Messrs Wilkinson Sword Ltd. presents an annual Sword of Peace to a unit or establishment of each Service which is judged to have made the most valuable contribution towards establishing good and friendly relations with the inhabitants of any community at home or overseas, over and above the unit's normal role and duty.

A list of the single-Service Units to which the Wilkinson Sword of Peace has been awarded since 1992, along with the citation for the last two years, is detailed in Table 1. A comprehensive list of all winners of the

Wilkinson Sword of Peace since its inception in 1966, and the associated citation, is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

In addition to the Single-Service awards, Messrs Wilkinson Sword Ltd. has, since 1994, presented an annual award (when a citation is deemed worthy of recognition) to the most deserving Joint Service unit or ad hoc grouping formed for any specific operation. A list of the four winners to date is given in Table 2, with a brief citation for the last two years.

Table 1: Wilkinson Sword of Peace (Navy)

Year	*Unit/Establishment*	*Location*
1992	MCM 1 Squadron	Baltic States
1993	HMS London	Durres and Albania
1994	HMS Fearless	Guyana
1995	HMS Invincible, HMS Illustrious	Various
1996	Inshore Training Squadron	Russia and Spain
1997	819 Naval Air Squadron	RNAS Prestwick
1998	Task Group 326.02 (Op Tellar)	Nicaragua and Honduras

Citations

1997: 819 Naval Air Squadron

For their close association and efforts in the local community around RNAS Prestwick.

1998: Task Group 326.02 (Op Tellar)

To all units within Task Group 326.02 (Op Tellar) for their contribution to the humanitarian assistance to Nicaragua and Honduras in the wake of Hurricane Mitch.

Wilkinson Sword of Peace (Army)

Year	*Unit/Establishment*	*Location*
1992	7 Sig Reg	Albania
	1 Cheshire Bn Gp	Bosnia
1993	21 Engr Regt	Bosnia
1994	1 KOBR	NI-Londonderry
1995	Gurkha Welfare Scheme	Nepal
1996	36 Engr Regt	Bosnia/UK
	1 RMP	Bosnia/Germany
1997	HCR	Bosnia/UK
1998	8 R Irish	NI-Tyrone

Citations

1997: Household Cavalry Regiment

Awarded for the work of two squadrons of the Household Cavalry Regiment in returning the lives of members of the severely damaged community of Banja Luka to conditions approaching normality, in which the seeds of long-standing peace might grow.

1998:8th (Co Armagh and Co Tyrone) Battalion Royal Irish Regiment

The Battalion has succeeded in making a dynamic and imaginative contribution to the community of Armagh, against the backcloth of unprecedented political momentum and a difficult operational environment.

Wilkinson Sword of Peace (Royal Air Force)

Year	*Unit/Establishment*	*Location*
1992	RAF Lyneham	UN Operations overseas
1993	RAF Kinloss	Local community
1994	RAF Manston	Local community
1995	RAF Laarbruch	Bosnia, Romania and Holland
1996	RAF Stornoway	Local community
1997	Numbers 1 and 34 Squadrons, RAF Regiment	Bosnia
1998	RAF Aldergrove	Northern Ireland

Citations

1997: Numbers 1 and 34 Squadrons of the RAF Regiment

For their part in Peace Support Operations as part of the multi-national peace Stabilisation Force at Banja Luka, Bosnia Herzegovina

1998: RAF Aldergrove

In recognition of the Station's response to the Omagh tragedy, and the wider humanitarian and fund-raising activities carried out throughout the year.

Table 2: Wilkinson Sword of Peace (Special)

Year	*Unit/Establishment*	*Location*
1994	Op Gabriel (5AB Bde)	Rwanda
1995	Op Chantress (Britlogbat, tri-Svc)	Angola
1996	Not awarded	—
1997	MCTC	UK
1998	BMATT South Africa	South Africa

Citations

1997: Military Corrective Training Centre, Colchester

Members of staff, SUS and young offenders have provided a valuable contribution to the local community, and to charitable organisations, out of all proportion to the manpower and time available to them.

1998: The British Military Advisory and Training Team (South Africa)

BMATT has played a crucial and influential role in harmonising the extremely difficult integration of former adversaries into a cohesive defence force.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* the means by which consultation takes place prior to announcement of the annual Wilkinson Sword of Peace awards and *(b)* his Department's inputs in nomination and selection. [105458]

Mr. Spellar: Entries for the Wilkinson Sword of Peace competitions are invited annually through Defence Council Instructions, which also detail the eligibility criteria. The selection of the most deserving single-Service unit is done by an adjudicating committee, under the chairmanship of the relevant Service Principal Personnel Officer. The selection of the most deserving tri-Service unit, for the award of the Wilkinson Sword of Peace (Special), is done by an adjudicating committee formed of the three Principal Personnel Officers, under the chairmanship of the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Personnel).

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much depleted uranium has been authorised for use by his Department in each of the last three years. [104265]

Mr. Spellar: The UK has not fired DU ammunition during the course of any of the operations it has undertaken over the last three years.

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps will be taken to ensure that United States Forces using the Ministry of Defence range at Cape Wrath later this year do not use depleted uranium shells. [104877]

Mr. Spellar: Any nation using the ranges at Cape Wrath must abide by our Standard Operating Regulations. These regulations preclude the use of depleted uranium shells.

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if depleted uranium shells have been used by British forces during live-firing exercises at the range at Cape Wrath. [104878]

Mr. Spellar: Depleted uranium shells have not been used at Cape Wrath by British forces.

Salisbury Plain

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on whose authority permission is given to non-military personnel to have access to his Department's land on Salisbury Plain; and what criteria are used. [104392]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My Department has a presumption in favour of access wherever this is consistent with military activities, environmental and conservation considerations, the health and safety of the public and the interests of our tenants. Formal applications to use Ministry of Defence land are considered on a case-by-case basis to ensure that none of the above constraints are compromised. All applications for the use of Salisbury Plain are vetted by the Commandant Army Training Estate Salisbury Plain's staff to ensure that live firing, manoeuvre or general military training is not taking place. The primary criterion when assessing access for non-military personnel onto the military estate is their personal safety.

MOD Hospital Units

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the total annual cost of operating Ministry of Defence hospital units in each of the last 10 years. [104414]

Mr. Spellar: The first Ministry of Defence Hospital Unit (MDHU) was opened on 1 April 1995. For the three financial years 1996–97, 1997–98, 1998–99 the total annual operating costs for MDHUs are as set out. These costs represent, in the main, pay and allowances for military personnel and support staff.

Year	*£ million*
1996–97	16.936
1997–98	18.185
1998–99	18.500

Costs are not available for the year 1995–96.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what was the *(a)* budgeted and *(b)* actual cost in each of the last two years, of running his Department's hospital unit in Germany; [104412]

(2) how many service personnel in Germany have been treated in facilities other than MOD medical services in each of the last two years; and what was the cost of this treatment. [104415]

Mr. Spellar: Following the market testing of the health function in Germany, the provision of all secondary health care for both the Army and the RAF is provided under contract with five designated German provider hospitals. There are no MDHUs in Germany. The budget set aside to meet these costs was £30.028M (DM65.953m @ £=DM 2.1958) in 1997–98 and £23.853M (DM65.245m @ £=DM2.7353) in 1998–99. The number of cases treated in each of these years was 27,831 and 40,539 at a cost of £30.668M (DM67.341m) and £29.171M (DM79.791m) respectively.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the expenditure was on Ministry of Defence hospital units in each of the last two years. [104417]

Mr. Spellar: The amounts paid to MDHU host NHS Trusts for the treatment of military personnel in each of the last two years are as follows. The sums shown are the net payment, taking into account the abatement of charges for the contribution of military clinical staff serving in the MDHU to the treatment of Service patients.

1997–98: £6.505 million

1998–99: £7.379 million

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many patients have been transferred from Ministry of Defence hospital units to the Royal Hospital Haslar in each of the last two years; for what reasons; and at what cost to his Department. [104409]

Mr. Spellar: Information is not routinely collected on tertiary transfers to the Royal Hospital Haslar. Any patients whose care might need to be transferred to another consultant outside a Ministry of Defence Hospital Unit would normally be referred to other local or regional NHS hospitals with the specialist units required.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel are awaiting *(a)* initial hospital appointments and *(b)* consultant appointments at Ministry of Defence hospital units; how many of them have been waiting for more than six months; and what assessment he has made of the cost implications of delays. [104410]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much has been paid annually to the NHS to cover NHS treatment in lieu of Ministry of Defence Hospital Unit treatment. [104831]

Mr. Spellar: Nil. Members of the Armed Forces are entitled to NHS hospital treatment on the same basis as civilians if appropriate military provision is not available. This understanding pre-dates the creation of MDHUs.

Indonesian Service Personnel (Training)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations have been made to the Government in respect of training for Indonesian service

personnel within the United Kingdom over the past 12 months; and how many are currently in training in the UK. [104418]

Mr. Spellar: A number of representations have been made to the Government in respect of training for Indonesian service personnel within the United Kingdom over the past 12 months. There are currently no Indonesian military personnel training in the UK at military training establishments or in non-military educational establishments at HMG's expense.

British Troops (Kosovo)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he was first informed of problems in communications between British ground forces in Kosovo; what steps he took; and if he will make a statement. [104407]

Mr. Spellar: The limitations of the CLANSMAN tactical radio system are well understood and it is due to replaced by the BOWMAN system. MOD reacted swiftly to concern regarding the capability of CLANSMAN on operations in Kosovo. Two programmes were run under Urgent Operational Requirement procedures. Project POLYGON provided a commercial handheld radio system for the battalion operating in the Pristina area and entered service in September 1999. Project POLYGON PLUS will shortly extend this commercial system, giving all UK troops in theatre access to the protected tactical system.

Married Quarters, Colchester

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many married quarters are provided at the Colchester Garrison; how many are currently occupied by non-service personnel; and how many are empty. [104583]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The total number of married quarters in Colchester Garrison is 1,361. There are 55 currently occupied by non-service personnel. These are: four housing MOD police/MOD civilian families; 36 leased to Colne Housing and 14 occupied by irregular occupants ie estranged service spouses or ex-service personnel. There are currently 164 empty properties awaiting either modernisation or the arrival of incoming service families.

Kirkcudbright Test Range

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the minutes of the meeting between representatives from the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency on the environmental monitoring programme of the test-firing of depleted uranium shells at the Kirkcudbright test range, held on 29 November 1999. [104702]

Mr. Spellar: The meeting on 29 November 1999 was hosted by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency at East Kilbride. No formal minutes of the meeting were produced. Only working notes recording actions were made for future reference.

Future Transport Aircraft

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* future and *(b)* existing requirements for air-to-air refuelling of helicopters there are; and to what extent that requirement has been included in the European Staff Requirement against which the Future Transport Aircraft requirement is being assessed. [104648]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* The MOD is considering a possible need to enable part of the future support helicopter fleet to conduct air-to-air refuelling operations. Final decisions to procure such a capability have yet to be taken.

The European Staff Requirement for the Future Large Aircraft includes an essential requirement for the aircraft to be capable of being re-roled as an air-to-air refuelling tanker, with a desirable requirement for it to be capable of refuelling helicopters.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason there has been a delay in a decision on the selection of the Future Transport Aircraft. [104647]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* We are continuing to assess the proposals for the Future Transport Aircraft. A full technical and commercial assessment is being carried out, focusing on value for money and taking account of all relevant factors such as aircraft performance, cost, risk and industrial factors. We hope to be in a position to make a decision early this year.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the Defence Procurement Agency will adopt the practices of smart procurement in relation to the Future Transport Aircraft requirement; [105171]

(2) what procurement practices the Defence Procurement Agency has adopted with regard to the Future Transport Aircraft selection; [105174]

(3) what assessment he has made of the compatibility of the requirements for airlift and air portability being used by his Department in its assessment of the Future Transport Aircraft contenders with those in the European Staff Requirement. [105173]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Army Commitments

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the current level of Army commitments. [104791]

Mr. Spellar: Some 30 per cent. of the trained Army is currently committed to operations, which is down from a peak of 47 per cent. at the height of the Kosovo campaign. Once the agreed force reductions in Bosnia have been implemented in full, this figure should fall to 28 per cent.

Russia (Military Relations)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on military relations with Russia. [105026]

Mr. Hoon: Engaging Russia in a constructive bilateral defence relationship is a high priority for the Government. Russia remains the highest priority in our "Outreach"

programme of defence assistance to central and eastern Europe countries. We wish to continue to develop an effective defence relationship with Russia and made good progress towards that objective in 1997 and 1998. Last year, however, the Russians curtailed co-operative activities as a sign of their opposition to UK/US action in Iraq and NATO action in Kosovo.

Aircraft Procurement

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent meetings the Minister for Defence Procurement has had with Airbus to discuss the A400M; and what was discussed. [105033]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My noble Friend the Minister of State for Defence Procurement had planned to visit Airbus in Toulouse on 12 January but Parliamentary commitments meant she was unable to go. She hopes to rearrange the visit shortly.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will assess the benefits of defence procurement practices used by Airbus Military Company. [105172]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent meetings, and on what dates, the Minister for Defence Procurement has had with Boeing to discuss the C-17 transport aircraft. [105035]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My noble Friend the Minister of State for Defence Procurement met officials from Boeing on 11 January to discuss a range of issues, including the C-17 transport aircraft.

Service Personnel (Orthopaedic Waiting Lists)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when and for what reason the £1.5 million allocated across all three services to reduce secondary care agency orthopaedic waiting lists for those on operational duties was withdrawn as part of his Department's annual efficiency savings. [104923]

Mr. Spellar: Funding to reduce orthopaedic waiting lists in the Defence Secondary Care Agency was not removed as part of my Department's efficiency programme as no funds had been allocated for this purpose in 1999–2000. At the beginning of the financial year consideration was given to the possibility of identifying funding to reduce waiting lists, primarily but not exclusively, for orthopaedic treatment. However, this did not prove to be practical, although some additional physiotherapy, provided through a separate initiative, is likely to have affected the numbers on waiting lists overall. The possibility of pursuing action to reduce orthopaedic waiting lists in the next financial year is currently under consideration.

Service Uniforms

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what criteria he will use in reaching a decision to revise guidelines on the wearing of service uniforms in public. [104800]

Mr. Spellar: We have no immediate plans to revise the guidelines on the wearing of service uniforms in public although they are kept under review. The current guidelines have been framed to give local commanders the flexibility to interpret the rules to cater for any specific considerations in their immediate area.

Married Quarters

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what unforeseen costs have arisen in connection with the refurbishment of forces' married quarters; what impact this will have on the timing of the refurbishment programme; and what additional budgetary provision is being made available to the Defence Housing Executive to meet the shortfall. [104799]

Mr. Spellar: At the time of the sale to Annington Homes in 1996 it was assessed that the cost of upgrading the bulk of the married quarters estate in mainland UK would be about £470 million and that work would be completed over a seven year period, that is by November 2003. A subsequent 100 per cent. stock condition survey established that additional work required, including structural and utilities improvements to houses, would cost an additional £112 million. This has necessitated extending the completion of the upgrade programme to 2005 on current expenditure plans with continued funding.

Memorandum of Understanding (USA)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on policy with regard to the Memorandum of Understanding on mutual communications support between the United Kingdom and the United States of America, signed at Washington on 22 and 28 November 1988. [100345]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 29 November 1999]:* In recognition of the importance of communications interoperability in naval operations and the benefits of providing mutual communications support, the Royal Navy and the United States Navy have agreed a Memorandum of Understanding. This sets out the procedures and provisions for mutual communications support including message receipt, handling relay, reformatting, delivery, transmission or retransmission and any related supplies and services, the provision of which was not for the direct and primary benefit of the Navy providing the support.

Army Foundation College

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what public subsidy has been offered to develop the site of the new Army Foundation College. [102577]

Mr. Spellar: I am not yet in a position to examine the details of individual bids for the development of the new Army Foundation College.

UK Commitments

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of *(a)* United Kingdom defence commitments and *(b)* the cost of United Kingdom commitments. [103193]

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Mr. Hoon: A full assessment of UK defence commitments was undertaken during the Strategic Defence Review Cm. 3999. Operational deployments for the year 1998–99 are set out in the MOD's Performance Report 1998–99 Cm. 4520 published in December 1999. In practice, the bulk of defence spending contributes to providing the defence capability needed to meet the missions and commitments set out.

Chinook

Mr. Martin Bell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the incidents of Uncommanded Flying Control Movements in Chinook helicopters since 1994 in which subsequent inspections reported no fault found. [103639]

Mr. Spellar: There were two incidents of Uncommanded Flying Control Movements in Chinook helicopters since 1994 in which subsequent inspections reported no fault found:

18 August 1995—aircraft experienced a 12° nose down pitch.

23 December 1997—aircraft suffered vertical bounce on the ground after landing.

Where an investigation has not pinpointed a fault, the components most likely to have caused the fault may be changed and the aircraft subsequently flight tested to confirm its correct function. In both of the occurrences listed the pilots were able to counteract the UFCM and control of the aircraft was not lost.

BBC World Service

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the answer of 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 501W, if he will make a statement on the purpose of his Department's financial contribution to BBC World Service Monitoring, indicating those votes and subheads which cover these funds. [105076]

Mr. Hain: BBC Monitoring provides a valued information service to Government. Rapid reporting of open source information from around the world is an important aspect of the work of the FCO and other parts of Government. The FCO's financial contribution (40 per cent.) to BBC Monitoring's core operation reflects this. The contribution is made from Class VII, Vote 1, Section A2.

HEALTH

Pay Review Bodies

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the reports and recommendations of the Health Pay Review bodies. [105835]

Mr. Milburn: I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the reports of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB) and the Review Body on Nursing staff, Midwives, Health Visitors and Professions Allied to Medicine (NPRB), which are published today. I understand that a similar announcement is being made by the First Minister and the Minister for Health and Community Care in Scotland. Copies of the reports are available in the Vote Office and the Library. I am grateful to the chairmen and members of both Review Bodies for their hard work.

Nurses are to receive another big real terms increase in pay and, for the second year in succession, the award is being paid in full, with no staging. The NPRB have recommended an across the board increase of 3.4 per cent. for nurses, midwives and health visitors with bigger targeted increases for specific groups. About 60,000 Grade E nurses on the scale maximum will get a total increase of 7.8 per cent., worth an extra £1,390 a year, to improve career progression and reward skill acquisition and experience. Another 5,500 enrolled and auxiliary nurses in Grade C will receive total increases of 7 per cent., worth an extra £975 a year. London allowances, stand-by and on-call allowances will also rise by 3.4 per cent. This means that an experienced staff nurse in London will earn basic pay of £22,250; and elsewhere £19,220, with allowances and enhancements typically worth £2,000 on top of this.

The NPRB have also recommended across the board increases of 3.4 per cent. for physiotherapists, radiographers and other professions allied to medicine (PAMs). In addition about 4,500 experienced staff in the Senior 2 grade will receive total increases worth between 8.1 per cent. and 8.4 per cent., to improve career progression for experienced staff at the top of their scale. The maximum of the scale for Senior 2 grade PAMs will be £21,290. London allowances, stand-by and on-call allowances will also rise by 3.4 per cent.

The Government have decided to accept all the NPRB pay recommendations for 2000–01, with no staging. The across the board settlement of 3.4 per cent. for nurses and other NPRB remit groups is high when set against the current headline inflation rate and more than we are expecting for pay settlements in the public sector generally. However, National Health Service staff deserve a fair pay award, especially after coping so magnificently with huge pressures over the past few weeks. Moreover, we are still having to tackle the nursing recruitment and retention problems inherited as a direct consequence of the last Government's failure. This year's settlement will build on last year's large awards. Taken together, the great majority of Grade D and E nurses—the backbone of the service, who deliver hands-on patient care—will have received very significant pay increases which both recognise and value their contribution to the NHS.

Last year's pay awards gave a big boost to the success of the nurses' recruitment campaign which we launched in February 1999. Already over 5,000 nurses have returned or are set to do so after completing refresher training, and numbers taking up nursing degree and diploma courses have increased by 24 per cent. and 18 per cent. respectively. There has also been a sharp increase in male applications and in applications from the ethnic minority communities. But we are not stopping there and are determined to build on this success in our 2000 campaign to be launched next month. These awards will provide a welcome boost.

The Doctors' and Dentists' Review Body (DDRB) has recommended an overall increase of 3.3 per cent. for salaried doctors and dentists and in the pay element of fees for general medical and general dental practitioners. In addition to the 3.3 per cent. increase, consultants will also start to receive from 1 April 2000 the increases

flowing through from the £50 million recommended by DDRB last year in recognition of their workload, work intensity and commitment to the NHS. These increases are worth a further 3 per cent. on their pay bill and will take two forms. First, changes to the discretionary point arrangements means that there will be over 2,400 extra awards available (worth over £2,500 each), making almost 5,600 in total, while the number of consultants eligible to receive awards will increase from 12,600 to almost 16,000. Second, there will be a new scheme to recognise consultants working in the most intense posts. For junior doctors the 3.3 per cent. increase is over and above the money already on the table in our current negotiations on their new contract; from October 2000, this would add 6 per cent. to their paybill in the first 12 months.

General dental practitioners will also benefit from a £20 million package to recognise experience and quality and to reward past and present commitment to NHS dentistry. This will give a big boost to the Government's dental strategy and to improve access to NHS dentistry.

The contribution of all staff will be crucial if we are to maintain and improve the quality of patient care and to modernise the NHS. These pay awards, which build on the platform set by last year's increases, reflect a proper balance between the pay needed to recruit, retain and motivate staff and the needs of modern service delivery and patient care.

Care Home Standards

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the proportion of existing residential capacity that will be lost if his Draft Required Standards for Residential and Nursing Care are implemented. [102994]

Mr. Hutton: Occupancy rates for care homes and nursing currently runs nationally at about 85 per cent., and locally, in some regions such as Lancashire, at about 50 per cent.

The number of beds which would need to be de-commissioned nationally in order to comply with the Centre for Policy on Ageing's proposed standards was estimated for the Department of Health by Laing and Buisson as approximately 4.2 per cent. for residential care homes and 8.1 per cent. for nursing homes. This information was published in September last year.

Further information on the possible impact of some of the proposed standards is set out in the annexes to the consultation document, "Fit for the Future?"

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding the methodology used by his Department in making their regulatory impact assessment in respect of the Draft Required Standards for Residential and Nursing Homes; and if he will make a statement. [102993]

Mr. Hutton: We have not received any comments specifically directed at methodology used in the regulatory impact assessment in the consultation document, "Fit for the Future?". However, we have yet to evaluate all the comments which are being received on "Fit for the Future?". We will carefully consider all the comments we receive.

Intensive Care Beds

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the lowest number of intensive care beds available in each region of England and Wales on each day between 20 December and 10 January. [104649]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* Information collected by the Department is unvalidated management information gathered over a period of hours primarily to give an indication of bed availability. However, the position may change constantly and it is not possible to establish whether the figures obtained reflect the lowest, maximum or average occupancy for that day. Even when no beds are reported as available, National Health Service trusts may invoke contingency arrangements to give patients the care they need. For this reason it is not possible to provide the information requested. The unvalidated management information has been placed in the Library.

NHS Direct

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his target waiting time for calls to NHS Direct to be answered; what measures are in place to monitor waiting times; and what waiting times were being achieved at the latest date for which figures are available. [104777]

Ms Stuart: *NHS Direct* does not have an explicit target waiting time for all callers by which time their call will be answered.

In November, the latest information available, 81 per cent. of calls were answered within 15 seconds, and calls were answered on average within 25 seconds.

Epidemics

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will state the current definition used by his Department of an epidemic. [104775]

Yvette Cooper: The epidemiologists definition of an epidemic is an increase in the frequency of occurrence of a disease in a population above its baseline level for a specified period of time. The term epidemic can be used when describing the pattern of either infectious or chronic diseases in the population.

Administrative definitions can be set for different diseases in which an arbitrary threshold is selected above which the term "epidemic" is applied. In the case of influenza, the Department introduced in 1996 an administrative definition of an "epidemic" for a rate of consultation (with a sample of general practices) of 400 per 100,000 population in a week.

Such influenza activity in England is thus monitored through the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) sentinel surveillance scheme. This records the number of first visits to a general practitioner with influenza-illness. Other respiratory illnesses prevalent at this time of year are recorded separately.

This system does not and cannot measure the real incidence of influenza since it is restricted to those people who visit their general practitioner. This year a major

campaign was run to encourage people to choose their own remedy, to consult a pharmacist and to use NHS Direct, as alternative sources of advice.

The severity of the disease itself can also vary from year to year. This year the elderly have been particularly affected by the complications of influenza. The level of cases of acute bronchitis, a serious complication of influenza, is the highest the RCGP surveillance system has seen for 15 years. In describing epidemics some other countries formally include measures of severity in the definition of an epidemic. For example, the United States declares an epidemic when the proportion of deaths due to pneumonia and influenza passes a certain threshold.

The Department has not introduced administrative definitions of an epidemic for diseases other than influenza.

Health Services (Lancashire)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how much money is spent per head of population on health services in *(a)* South Lancashire and *(b)* North Lancashire Health Authority area; [105115]

(2) what assessment he has made of the adequacy of medical services at Chorley and South Ribble Hospital; [105117]

(3) what assessment he has made of the provision of satellite renal services at Chorley and South Ribble Hospital; [105116]

(4) if he will make a statement on the financial situation of the South Lancashire Health Authority; [105114]

(5) what plans he has to introduce new and enhanced existing medical services at Chorley and South Ribble Hospital; [105170]

(6) if he will end the practice of postcode medicine in Lancashire by merging the relevant health authorities. [105113]

Ms Stuart: South Lancashire and North West Lancashire health authorities commissioned Professor Sir Leslie Turnberg to review the provision of medical services in Chorley, South Ribble and Preston and to recommend the best configuration of services to meet the needs of local residents. The Boards of Chorley and South Ribble National Health Service Trust and Preston Acute Hospitals NHS Trust endorsed the recommendations of that review team.

The NHS Executive is currently undertaking organisational development work designed to improve health and health services in the north west. Any proposals for organisational reconfigurations of health authorities arising from these discussions will be subject to formal public consultation.

Figures for expenditure per head of population in South Lancashire and North West Lancashire, are given in the table.

South Lancashire Health Authority planned for an income and expenditure deficit of £1.1 million for 1999–2000—the forecast outturn at Q3 indicates that this plan will be achieved. The authority is planning to return to a recurrently balanced financial position in the short term.

The health authority has commissioned an independent review of the health economy within South Lancashire and all relevant parties, the health authority, primary care groups and NHS Trusts are supporting this review. It is intended that the review will assist the health economy in South Lancashire to identify solutions to the current financial position.

The four health authorities serving Lancashire and South Cumbria have agreed a strategy to improve the provision of renal services in the area. An additional 15 dialysis stations, due to open at the Royal Preston Hospital in the spring, will benefit Chorley and South Ribble residents. The next stage of the process will involve investment in satellite units and the possibility of a unit at Chorley has been recognised in the strategy.

The range of quality of medical services provided by Chorley and South Ribble District General Hospital is kept under continuous review by commissioning health authorities.

Expenditure on health services by head of population in the North West Region (by health authority)

1998–99	*£*
North West Lancashire Health Authority	649.68
South Lancashire Health Authority	606.42
North West Region	649.50

Notes:
1. The majority of drugs expenditure has been accounted for by the Prescription Pricing Authority rather than individual health authorities. Also the majority of General Dental Services expenditure is not available by health authority.
2. Figures are taken from health authority annual accounts which are prepared on a resource basis and therefore differ from cash allocations in each year.

Source:
Health authority accounts for 1998–99.
Mid-year resident population estimates for 1998.

Care in the Community

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to require organisations which provide care in the community to ensure that residents in receipt of the mobility component of disability living allowance retain that money or have it expended solely on their behalf. [104818]

Mr. Hutton: The Mobility Component of Disability Living Allowance may not be taken into account for charging purposes. Section 73(14) of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992 requires these payments, or the right to receive them, be disregarded in any charging schemes which have regard to a person's means.

Charities

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had with ministers on proposals to amend charity law to enable charities in receipt of Section 64 grants to improve accountability of their use of public funds; and if he will make a statement. [104820]

Mr. Hutton: None. Government funding for voluntary organisations, including aspects of accountability, is however to be covered in a Code of Practice to underpin the "Compact on Relations between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector

in England". The Department is involved with the voluntary sector in the development of the Code and will encourage the application of its principles at local level.

Cancer (Death Rates)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the question tabled by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and East Cleveland on 1 December for answer on 6 December relating to death rates from cancer (ref. 101422). [104772]

Yvette Cooper: I replied to my hon. Friend on 11 January, *Official Report*, column 140W.

University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will appoint board members for the university hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust. [104823]

Mr. Denham: Following the recent appointment of Philip Hammersley CBE as chair of the University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, the non-executive directors will be appointed shortly.

Mental Health Services

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many GP referrals were there of people with mental health problems in each of the last 10 years. [105120]

Mr. Hutton: The Department does not keep central records of the diagnosis given by General Medical Practitioners to their patients. However, records have been kept since 1995–96 of the number of written referrals to specialised NHS mental health services. These show:

GP written referrals to mental health specialities 1995–96 to 1999–2000

Year	*Q1*	*Q2*	*Q3*	*Q4*	*Total*
1995–96	54,014	53,527	51,908	59,627	219,076
1996–97	57,551	54,843	59,227	60,392	232,013
1997–98	61,771	58,307	59,549	62,183	241,810
1998–99	56,819	55,901	57,570	61,463	231,753
1999–2000	56,966	55,667	—	—	—

Source:
QM08 quarterly return from NHS trusts

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were the sickness rates of staff employed in NHS mental health services for each of the last 10 years. [105122]

Mr. Denham: According to a survey conducted by the Department in 1998–99 the average sickness absence rate for staff directly employed by National Health Service trusts was 4.6 per cent. This is equivalent to approximately eight million out of the 176 million days worked each year by National Health Service staff. Details of the survey can be found in Health Service Circular 1999/229, "Managing Violence, Accidents and Sickness Absence in the NHS", copies of which are available in the Library. Similar information for earlier years, and information about staff working in mental health services, is not collected centrally, but may be held locally by individual National Health Service employers. We have agreed improvement targets for health authorities and NHS trusts to

> "achieve year on year improvement in sickness absence rates"

of 20 per cent. by 2001 and 30 per cent. by 2003.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what was the staff-to-patient ratio in NHS mental health services for each of the past 10 years; [105119]

(2) what was the ratio of National Health Service employees working with people with mental health problems per 100,000 of the population, in each of the past 10 years. [105084]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the average annual caseload for *(a)* mental health social workers, *(b)* mental health occupational therapists, *(c)* psychiatric nurses and *(d)* psychologists for each of the last 10 years. [105123]

Mr. Hutton: The information in the form requested is not collected centrally.

Information about the number of patient contacts with the Occupational Therapy Services, Community Psychiatric Nursing Services and Clinical Psychology Services is collected annually and published by the Department. The latest information is contained in the following summaries which are available in the Library; "Occupational Therapy Services, Summary Information for 1998–99, England", "Patient Care in the Community, Community Psychiatric Nursing, Summary Information for 1998–99, England" and "Clinical Psychology Services, Summary Information for 1998–99, England". Information about patient contacts made by mental health social workers is not collected centrally.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much of the additional money allocated for the NHS in the Comprehensive Spending Review has been earmarked for NHS mental health services. [105118]

Mr. Hutton: "Modernising Mental Health Services" set out our vision for safe, sound and supportive mental health services for working age adults. In launching the strategy we announced additional funding over the 3-year Comprehensive Spending Review period of £700 million for health and social services.

Over the 3-year Comprehensive Spending Review period (1999–2000 to 2001–02) at least £500 million will be ear-marked for mental health services from within the modernisation funds for health and social services. Of this over £300 million will come from the National Health Service modernisation fund.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the total number of staff working in NHS mental health services in each of the last 10 years. [105121]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is not held centrally. The Workforce Action Team charged with taking forward the Mental Health National Service Framework workforce, planning, education and training underpinning programme, is seeking to map the mental health workforce.

Eye Tests (Disabled People)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will provide free eye tests and prescriptions for the disabled. [105162]

Mr. Hutton: The extensive exemption and remission arrangements mean that many disabled people in England are entitled to free prescriptions and sight tests. Similar arrangements exist elsewhere in the United Kingdom but are now a matter for the devolved Administrations.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Supervision of Solicitors

Dr. Cable: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, what plans the Lord Chancellor has to strengthen the supervision of solicitors with particular regard to *(a)* investigation of solicitor negligence and *(b)* more stringent penalties to be imposed by the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors in cases of poor service. [104630]

Jane Kennedy: Allegations of negligence are reviewed by the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors, which, as it cannot give legal advice, has set up a panel of independent solicitors to whom such allegations may be referred. The panel solicitors will advise the complainant on whether a solicitor has been negligent and if so what action can by pursued. It is thereafter a decision for the complainant how to pursue the matter. However, the position on how complaints about negligence are handled is kept under review.

The Office for the Supervision of Solicitors can currently award compensation of £1,000 for inadequate professional service. However, the Lord Chancellor has exercised his powers to increase the limit to £5,000. This is to take effect from 31 March 2000.

Asset Sales

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, if he will list the items in the National Assets Register sold by his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies since 11 February 1999, stating in each case the amount of money realised; if he will estimate the total amount raised from such sales to date; and if he will make a statement. [104473]

Jane Kennedy: Details of the items in the asset registers of the Lord Chancellor's Department, its agencies and associated public bodies, which have been sold since 11 February 1999, along with the amount of money realised from such sales to date are listed in the table. For further details and an estimate of asset sales for 1999–2000, I refer the hon. Member to a written answer that I gave to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) on 2 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 156–57W.

Proceeds from asset sales (11 February 1999 to date)

Description	£
Land and Buildings	301,019
Motor Vehicles	24,550
Computer Equipment	2,950
Other Equipment	1,467
Total	329,986

Staff Bonuses

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, how much his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies spent in total on extra bonuses above usual payments for staff working over the New Year period; what were the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum bonuses paid; how many people received the (i) maximum and (ii) minimum payments; and if he will make a statement. [104474]

Jane Kennedy: Details are given in the table. Bonuses were payable to staff required over the New Year period for testing and reporting on IT, security or facilities systems.

	How much was spent[1] *(£)*	*The maximum bonus paid (£)*	*Number of staff claiming the maximum*	*The minimum bonus paid (£)*	*Number of staff claiming the minimum*
Lord Chancellor's Department[2]	36,250[3]	600	10	50	98
Northern Ireland Court Service	26,150[4]	550	3	75	15
Land Registry	32,110[5]	365	1	25	47
Public Record Office	4,700	250	8	150	11

[1] The amounts given do not include ERNIC (employment related National Insurance Contributions)
[2] Including LCD Headquarters and Associated Offices, the Court Service and the Public Trust Office.
[3] Based on bonus claims received up to and including 12 January 2000.
[4] Based on bonus claims received up to and including 13 January 2000.
[5] Based on bonus claims received up to and including 13 January 2000.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Passport Office

17. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the extra cost incurred by the Passport Office as a result of the backlog of applications for passports. [103977]

Mrs. Roche: We estimate the costs at £12.6 million.

Police Numbers

18. **Mr. Heald:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to increase the total number of police officers in England and Wales over the next three years. [103979]

Mr. Straw: Under the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994, chief officers of police determine staffing requirements within the overall resources available to them.

Over this and the next two years, we have increased the resources available from central Government by £1.24 billion. In addition, the Crime Fighting Fund will be used to recruit 5,000 new police officers over and above the number which forces would otherwise have recruited over the next three years commencing in April 2000. £35 million will be allocated in the first year of the fund to kick start the scheme. Additional money will be provided in years two and three.

Victims of Crime

19. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with organisations representing the victims of crime about improving information to victims about appeals. [103980]

Mr. Boateng: Home Office Ministers and officials have frequent contact, both formal and informal, with Victim Support and other organisations representing victims of crime, including the criminal justice agencies and services. There have been no formal discussions in recent months about information to victims about appeals.

Electoral Reform

20. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of consultations on the Jenkins Commission's proposals for reform of the voting system. [103981]

Mr. Straw: We have said that we wish to see a debate in the country about the merits of the Jenkins proposals. That is continuing. The final decision as to whether to adopt the Jenkins proposals will be taken by the people of this country in a referendum.

Winston Silcott

21. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis on the payment of compensation to Winston Silcott. [103982]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, was informed by the Metropolitan Police Solicitor of the reasons for the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis seeking to settle the civil action for malicious prosecution brought against the Commissioner by Mr. Silcott. The settlement was made without an admission of guilt and my right hon. Friend does not intend to call for a report from the Commissioner.

Police Funding (Lancashire)

22. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department to which funds the Chief Constable of Lancashire can apply to bid for additional funding for more police officers for 2000–01. [103983]

Mr. Straw: As I informed the House on 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 194–97W, Chief Constables and police authorities in England and Wales were invited on 2 December to submit bids by 10 January for a share of the Crime Fighting Fund. I placed a copy of the bidding guidelines in the Library of the House.

The fund will be used to recruit 5,000 police officers over and above the number forces would otherwise have recruited over the next three years commencing in April 2000. £35 million will be allocated in the first year of the fund to kick start the scheme. Additional money will be provided in years two and three.

Elections (New Technology)

23. **Mr. White:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to enable new technology to be used in national and local elections. [103984]

29. **Mr. Wyatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to promote the use of modern technology in electoral procedures. [103990]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Representation of the People Bill, which has just completed its Committee stage, includes provisions to allow local authorities to pilot innovative electoral procedures, such as electronic voting and electronic counting.

Immigration

24. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the penalties available to ensure road hauliers do not bring illegal immigrants into the United Kingdom. [103985]

Mrs. Roche: Under Section 25 of the Immigration Act 1971, it is a criminal offence to facilitate the entry to the United Kingdom of an illegal entrant, or asylum claimant. The penalty, on summary conviction, is a fine of not more than £5,000 or imprisonment for not more than six months, or both; conviction on indictment is punishable by a fine or imprisonment for not more than seven years, or both. That period is increased under Section 29 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to ten years.

Section 32–37 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 make provision for a civil penalty to be imposed for the carriage of a clandestine entrant to the United Kingdom. Subject to the laying of enabling regulations before Parliament in the near future, it is envisaged that the penalty will be the sum of £2,000 for each clandestine entrant.

CCTV

25. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications he has received for portable CCTV units in the past year; what proposals he has to provide resources for portable systems of CCTV; and if he will make a statement. [103986]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Forty five applications under the first round of the Crime Reduction Programme Closed Circuit Television Initiative were solely for portable or mobile CCTV schemes, while many of the remaining 705 applications contained a mobile element.

Today's announcement of CCTV awards includes four bids for mobile systems, totalling £256,020. This is on top of £32,056 awarded last month to a mobile scheme. 18 proposals for mobile schemes to a potential value of £2.7 million have been deferred for further consideration.

Further bids for mobile CCTV systems can be submitted under the next phase of funding, details of which will be announced shortly.

Crime Reduction Initiative

26. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many homes will be covered by his Department's Crime Reduction Programme Initiative to reduce burglaries. [103987]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Reducing Burglary Initiative is expected to cover a total of approximately two million households.

In addition, the initiative to provide security improvements for the homes of pensioners on low incomes in areas with high burglary rates, which we announced in September, is expected to provide enhanced security in up to 150,000 homes.

34. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many low-income pensioner households will receive help from the Crime Reduction Programme in respect of burglary in the current financial year. [103995]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The £11 million initiative to provide security improvements for the homes of pensioners on low incomes in areas with high burglary rates, which we announced in September, will not start until June 2000 but is expected to provide enhanced security for up to 150,000 homes over two years.

About 223,000 households are currently covered by 63 anti-burglary projects under the £50 million Reducing Burglary Initiative (which will eventually cover some two million households). However, details of the income or age group of the households involved are not available centrally.

Asylum Seekers

27. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers entered the United Kingdom through Heathrow Airport in 1999, 1998, 1997 and 1996. [103988]

Mrs. Roche: A total of 10,785 asylum applications were made at the four Heathrow Terminals in the period January to November 1999. This compares with 10,665 in 1998, 8,625 in 1997 and 8,520 in 1996.

28. **Mr. Gerrard:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to assist those granted asylum in the United Kingdom to integrate into British society. [103989]

Mrs. Roche: A consultation paper was issued on 2 November 1999 which set out our proposals for the integration of refugees and those granted exceptional leave to remain based on partnership with everyone involved—the voluntary sector, local authorities and social services. Over 30 responses have been received and we will be considering the way forward in the light of those responses.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of asylum seekers who will be sent to locations in Scotland in 2000 and 2001. [103971]

Mrs. Roche: It is too soon to say how many asylum seekers might be dispersed to Scotland. The number will depend on the extent to which accommodation can be provided in Scotland, and the number of asylum seekers seeking a full support package. We are in discussion with the Scottish Executive and a Scottish Consortium representing local authority interests in Scotland about these matters.

Crime Figures

30. **Mr. Paul Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the most recent crime figures for Kent. [103991]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The latest figures, covering the 12 months to September 1999, will be published tomorrow.

31. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the performance of Cheshire Police in reducing crime. [103992]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Cheshire Police achieved a reduction in recorded crime of 26 per cent. over the period 1993–94 to 1998–99. The ratio of crimes to population in Cheshire also compares well with other forces. In partnership with local authorities and other agencies, the police are continuing that good work.

32. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the latest crime figures for Cheshire. [103993]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The latest figures, covering the 12 months to September 1999, will be published tomorrow.

Witness Protection

33. **Mr. Heppell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures is he taking to ensure that witnesses in magistrates courts are adequately protected. [103994]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In February 1999, we asked Victim Support to replicate in magistrates courts the excellent support service for victims and witnesses they were already providing, with Home Office funding, at all Crown Court centres. The annual Home Office grant to Victim Support is being increased incrementally by 50 per cent. to £19 million to enable them to establish witness support services in all magistrates courts by April 2002.

Trial by Jury

35. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many representations he has received on his proposals to restrict the right to elect trial by jury; and if he will make a statement. [103996]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There were 133 responses to the consultation paper, "Determining mode of trial in either-way cases". The Home Office has also received about 210 letters on this issue.

WPC Yvonne Fletcher

36. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been reported to him by the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis in the case of WPC Yvonne Fletcher since the arrival of the UK's ambassador in Tripoli. [103997]

Mr. Straw: None as yet, although the Metropolitan police intend to pursue their investigation into WPC Fletcher's murder vigorously. Our Ambassador in Tripoli has now taken up his post and this should help in that process. The Metropolitan police continue to expect full co-operation from the Libyan authorities.

Police Funding

37. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of police forces which have had a real-terms fall in funding in the current financial year after the cost of police pensions is taken into account. [103998]

Mr. Straw: Allocations of Government funding to police authorities are made on the basis of a needs-based formula, which takes into account projected pensions expenditure. As with most formulae, variations can occur from year to year, with some authorities doing relatively better than others.

Police authority "budget requirements" will increase by 3.1 per cent. in this financial year. On the basis of estimates provided by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, the police service nationally could have an increase in net expenditure in this financial year of 5.9 per cent. taking account among other things of the use of reserves. It is for individual authorities to determine how best to manage their budgets. Prudent management of medical retirements can help police authorities to reduce pensions' costs and deploy more resources to front-line policing.

Polling Stations (Access)

38. **Mr. Darvill:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to improve access for the disabled to polling stations. [103999]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Guidance on national minimum access standards for disabled voters was issued in June 1999; new guidance on disabled access is being developed; grants are available for temporary ramps and polling screens; and, the Representation of the People Bill provides for the piloting of alternative voting arrangements at local elections to improve access to voting.

Victim Support

39. **Mr. Patrick Hall:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what level of financial support from central Government have been made to Victim Support in each of the last five financial years. [104000]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The annual Home Office grant to Victim Support in the last five years is as follows:

£ million

Financial year	*Grant*
1995–96	10.817
1996–97	11.682
1997–98	12.682
1998–99	12.682
1999–2000	17.300

The grant is set to rise to £18.3 million in 2000–01 and to £19 million in 2001–02.

Weekend Voting

Mr. Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has to establish pilot projects for voting at the weekend. [103973]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Representation of the People Bill, which has just completed its Committee stage, includes provisions to allow local authorities to pilot innovative electoral procedures, such as voting at the weekend.

Public Safety Radio Communications Service

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list on a force by force basis the estimated costs of implementing PSRCP [104376]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Most of the costs of implementing the Public Safety Radio Communications Service (PSRCS) are contained within annual charges for the core service. These will be met by central funding by means of deduction from total police grant provision and will be reduced by the £50 million subsidy I announced last September.

Individual forces will elect to take a range of services additional to the core service to meet their own requirements. From figures provided by forces we estimate that the cost of these non-core services will be around £30 million per annum for the police service nationally. The table provides the currently available estimates for the cost of non-core services to individual forces.

Forces will also need to purchase radio terminals, control room equipment and integration services. No force-specific estimates are available, but the Police Information Technology Organisation estimates that the total cost of these additional items for forces in England and Wales will be around £300 million in net present cost terms. This includes the cost of initial purchase and subsequent replacement over the life of the project but excludes the cost of the dedicated teams which each force will need to set up to manage implementation of the

PSRCS. These costs need to be set against the expenditure which forces already incur in maintaining their existing radiocommunication systems.

Estimate of force annual PSRCS menu service charge at 1999–2000 prices

Force	Estimated annual cost of menu services £000
Avon and Somerset Constabulary	84
Bedfordshire Police	105
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	210
Cheshire Constabulary	384
City of London Police	132
Cleveland Constabulary	257
Cumbria Constabulary	242
Derbyshire Constabulary	297
Devon and Cornwall Constabulary	916
Dorset Police	160
Durham Constabulary	671
Dyfed-Powys Police	23
Essex Police	1,357
Gloucestershire Constabulary	233
Greater Manchester Police (GMP)	599
Gwent Constabulary	134
Hampshire Constabulary	1,442
Hertfordshire Constabulary	412
Humberside Police	216
Kent County Constabulary	1,460
Lancashire Constabulary	755
Leicestershire Constabulary	346
Lincolnshire Police	206
Merseyside Police	329
Metropolitan Police Service	3,188
Norfolk Constabulary	248
North Wales Police	238
North Yorkshire Police	886
Northamptonshire Police	1,281
Northumbria Police	635
Nottinghamshire Constabulary	178
South Wales Constabulary	684
South Yorkshire Police	256
Staffordshire Police	801
Suffolk Constabulary	1,450
Surrey Police	334
Sussex Police	1,180
Thames Valley Police	1,303
Warwickshire Constabulary	650
West Mercia Constabulary	268
West Midlands Police	2,670
West Yorkshire Police	2,297
Wiltshire Constabulary	135
Total for England and Wales	29,655

Estimate of force annual PSRCS menu service charge at 1999–2000 prices

Police

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the real terms change in police budgets in each English county and Metropolitan area for each year from 1990–91 to 2001–02; if he will provide estimates on the same basis excluding moneys needed to fund annual increases in police pensions; and if he will make a statement. [105097]

Mr. Boateng: The information available, which has been compiled from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's Police Statistics, is set out in the tables. Police authority budgets for 2001–02 have not been set. Information on net police pensions expenditure for 1990–91 to 1992–93 is not readily available.

Table 1: Police force net expenditure, and percentage change in real terms, 1990–91 to 1999–2000

	1990–91		1991–92		1992–93		1993–94		1994–95	
	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)
Avon and Somerset	107,282	2.9	116,004	1.8	127,928	6.7	134,323	2.3	141,283	3.7
Bedfordshire	36,053	3.1	40,027	4.5	45,036	8.9	48,666	5.3	51,514	4.4
Cambridgeshire	43,173	3.1	48,001	4.7	51,126	3.1	56,974	8.6	58,650	1.5
Cheshire	63,620	–0.2	68,496	1.4	74,058	4.7	80,026	5.3	82,804	2.0
City of London	38,288	–0.3	41,919	3.1	45,151	4.3	51,111	10.3	52,365	1.0
Cleveland	52,889	3.2	58,690	4.5	62,269	2.7	66,289	3.7	69,007	2.6
Cumbria	41,312	5.1	46,548	6.1	50,736	5.5	51,699	–0.7	54,281	3.5
Derbyshire	62,086	–3.3	66,686	1.1	76,554	11.1	78,976	0.5	84,362	5.3
Devon and Cornwall	107,378	4.8	119,619	4.9	129,634	4.9	137,578	3.4	140,830	0.9
Dorset	50,150	6.6	54,239	1.8	57,639	2.9	59,345	0.3	66,285	10.1
Durham	45,673	2.2	49,517	2.1	53,853	5.3	57,825	4.6	59,237	1.0
Dyfed-Powys	32,504	0.6	36,366	5.3	40,189	7.0	42,315	2.6	45,595	6.2
Essex	106,902	7.3	119,118	4.9	129,559	5.3	137,043	3.0	n/a	n/a
Gloucestershire	41,526	5.1	46,370	5.1	49,361	3.0	51,549	1.7	55,180	5.5
Greater Manchester	236,520	1.6	256,562	2.1	281,761	6.3	304,622	5.3	320,931	3.9
Gwent	34,595	5.4	38,270	4.2	40,642	2.8	42,609	2.1	44,148	2.2
Hampshire	114,172	4.3	127,841	5.4	142,133	7.6	146,790	0.6	155,257	4.3
Hertfordshire	59,681	5.4	63,633	0.4	70,029	6.5	74,029	3.0	84,435	12.5
Humberside	71,151	2.5	78,591	4.0	86,795	6.9	90,194	1.2	92,365	1.0
Kent	107,675	2.1	128,118	12.0	136,307	3.0	142,749	2.0	153,757	6.2
Lancashire	114,195	5.4	127,076	4 8	132,092	0.6	142,518	5.1	145,181	0.4
Leicestershire	63,597	1.9	70,562	4.5	75,262	3.2	78,201	1.2	81,166	2.3
Lincolnshire	43,025	5.2	48,704	6.6	53,039	5.4	55,698	2.3	n/a	n/a
Merseyside	165,167	2.1	182,680	4.1	193,410	2.5	207,713	4.6	215,461	2.3
Metropolitan Police	1,273,265	9.6	1,420,575	5.1	1,513,654	3.1	1,552,791	–0.1	1,588,001	0.8
Norfolk	49,106	5.2	56,134	7.6	60,658	4.6	64,086	2.9	68,546	5.5
Northamptonshire	41,997	2.5	47,081	5.6	52,575	8.1	55,136	2.2	60,306	7.8

Table 1: Police force net expenditure, and percentage change in real terms, 1990–91 to 1999–2000

	1990–91		1991–92		1992–93		1993–94		1994–95	
	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)
Northumbria	124,873	3.0	139,999	5.6	145,882	0.9	160,045	6.9	175,837	8.3
North Wales	45,838	2.4	51,608	6.0	57,140	7.2	59,818	2.0	62,647	3.3
North Yorkshire	48,995	2.5	53,161	2.2	60,123	9.5	63,477	2.8	63,772	-1.0
Nottinghamshire	79,305	5.8	85,209	1.2	92,856	5.5	98,755	3.6	106,195	6.0
South Wales	108,737	2.5	122,294	5.9	129,897	2.8	134,019	0.5	133,688	-1.7
South Yorkshire	101,200	3.9	108,676	1.1	122,395	9.0	129,441	3.0	137,623	4.8
Staffordshire	76,903	6.5	84,322	3.2	90,497	3.9	96,896	4.3	100,265	2.0
Suffolk	44,755	4.0	49,246	3.6	52,052	2.3	55,460	3.8	56,828	1.0
Surrey	59,126	3.1	64,426	2.6	71,426	7.3	75,322	2.7	84,371	10.4
Sussex	94,916	2.5	108,489	7.6	117,529	4.9	122,444	1.5	130,382	5.0
Thames Valley	146,950	12.5	156,072	0.0	165,443	2.6	179,632	5.8	192,080	5.4
Warwickshire	37,963	9.9	41,479	2.9	44,128	3.0	47,637	5.2	50,000	3.5
West Mercia	70,480	3.7	79,836	6.7	84,508	2.5	91,372	5.3	98,108	5.9
West Midlands	231,478	2.7	254,477	3.5	288,798	9.9	297,807	0.5	313,518	3.8
West Yorkshire	190,733	4.8	206,169	1.8	215,727	1.3	226,900	2.5	236,100	2.6
Wiltshire	41,547	6.9	46,907	6.3	51,912	7.1	54,252	-1.8	59,155	7.5

	1995–96		1996–97		1997–98		1998–99		1999–2000	
	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)	£000	(+/-%)
Avon and Somerset	141,091	-2.9	152,087	4.4	152,673	-2.4	162,726	3.2	174,424	4.8
Bedfordshire	54,533	2.9	56,627	0.6	58,570	0.6	61,778	2.1	64,027	1.4
Cambridgeshire	61,003	1.1	65,024	3.3	68,681	2.7	73,432	3.5	75,363	0.4
Cheshire	87,315	2.5	94,177	4.5	104,005	7.4	107,093	-0.3	111,094	1.5
City of London	56,042	4.0	57,317	-0.9	57,893	-1.8	60,350	0.9	58,719	-4.8
Cleveland	68,558	-3.4	73,108	3.3	75,426	0.3	81,295	4.4	85,397	2.7
Cumbria	53,444	-4.3	56,856	3.1	61,709	5.6	62,532	-1.9	64,693	1.2
Derbyshire	86,015	-0.9	90,420	1.8	95,641	2.9	100,064	1.3	107,035	4.6
Devon and Cornwall	144,513	-0.3	150,392	0.8	155,435	0.5	166,330	3.6	173,649	2.1
Dorset	63,276	-7.2	67,831	3.9	69,727	0.0	73,117	1.5	77,749	4.0
Durham	62,432	2.4	68,035	5.6	75,166	7.5	74,673	-3.8	80,712	5.7
Dyfed-Powys	46,197	-1.5	47,869	0.4	50,952	3.5	50,040	-4.9	56,143	9.7
Essex	n/a	n/a	151,412	n/a	157,487	1.2	156,822	-3.6	171,590	7.0
Gloucestershire	53,977	-4.9	58,420	4.9	58,633	-2.4	62,862	3.8	65,933	2.6
Greater Manchester	331,304	0.3	341,170	-0.2	353,319	0.7	354,171	-2.9	387,256	6.9
Gwent	44,436	-2.2	57,742	25.9	64,598	8.8	67,655	1.4	71,414	3.2
Hampshire	163,193	2.2	172,845	2.6	180,791	1.7	186,661	0.0	196,955	3.2
Hertfordshire	87,825	1.1	88,863	-2.0	93,011	1.8	95,068	-1.0	102,361	5.3
Humberside	96,418	1.5	99,719	0.2	106,220	3.6	112,571	2.6	114,306	-0.7
Kent	155,223	-1.9	161,625	0.9	174,211	4.8	175,577	-2.4	186,225	3.7
Lancashire	152,225	1.9	161,865	3.0	169,275	1.7	177,310	1.4	182,679	0.8
Leicestershire	86,855	4.0	92,853	3.6	98,789	3.5	102,790	0.8	106,279	1.1
Lincolnshire	n/a	n/a	61,508	n/a	66,184	4.7	66,664	-2.5	69,970	2.6
Merseyside	220,007	-0.8	221,172	-2.6	224,327	-1.3	240,267	3.7	249,522	1.6
Metropolitan Police	1,639,392	0.3	1,683,181	-0.5	1,676,617	-3.1	1,716,425	-0.9	1,840,245	4.9
Norfolk	70,378	-0.2	75,547	4.0	80,222	3.3	80,543	-2.8	86,870	5.5
Northamptonshire	57,075	-8.0	59,252	0.6	64,605	6.1	67,057	0.5	70,432	2.7
Northumbria	178,820	-1.2	186,410	1.0	195,092	1.8	205,270	1.9	213,010	1.5
North Wales	65,933	2.3	68,266	0.3	70,920	1.0	72,481	-1.0	80,505	8.6
North Yorkshire	63,096	-3.8	67,042	2.9	71,840	4.2	75,344	1.6	78,085	1.4
Nottinghamshire	106,334	-2.7	113,591	3.5	120,556	3.2	127,018	2.0	130,173	0.2
South Wales	144,452	5.0	147,458	-1.1	159,411	5.1	160,938	-2.2	169,968	3.3
South Yorkshire	144,354	1.9	150,949	1.3	166,027	7.0	167,159	-2.5	173,933	1.8
Staffordshire	98,661	-4.4	107,832	5.9	110,264	-0.5	116,231	2.1	127,472	7.3
Suffolk	55,814	-4.5	60,963	5.8	63,676	1.6	66,096	0.5	70,538	4.4
Surrey	83,000	-4.4	85,345	-0.4	90,976	3.7	91,425	-2.7	100,375	7.4
Sussex	137,785	2.7	150,626	5.9	157,631	1.8	161,847	-0.6	165,804	0.2
Thames Valley	194,465	-1.6	201,397	0.3	210,333	1.6	209,675	-3.5	232,729	8.6
Warwickshire	47,760	-7.2	47,686	-3.3	51,003	4.0	52,015	-1.2	56,157	5.6
West Mercia	95,886	-5.0	102,078	3.1	107,788	2.7	113,755	2.2	116,490	0.2
West Midlands	331,075	2.6	337,992	-1.1	360,129	3.6	368,608	-0.9	380,971	1.1
West Yorkshire	238,801	-1.7	265,233	7.6	281,745	3.3	277,994	-4.4	288,865	1.6
Wiltshire	54,448	-10.5	59,993	6.7	58,535	-5.1	68,811	13.8	69,715	-0.9

Notes:

1990–91 to 1998–99—CIPFA Police Statistics Actuals

1999–2000—CIPFA Police Statistics Estimates

Real terms increases based on Treasury GDP Deflators published on 23 December 1999

Table 2: Police force net expenditure 1993–94 to 1999–2000; percentage increase in real terms excluding pensions expenditure

	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000
Avon and Somerset	-1.4	3.7	-3.6	2.1	-4.0	5.5	2.1
Bedfordshire	5.6	1.6	2.1	-0.1	-1.6	0.9	0.2
Cambridgeshire	8.1	0.1	0.6	1.7	1.7	3.4	-1.8
Cheshire	4.4	2.3	-0.3	8.2	4.0	1.3	-2.0
City of London	9.6	-0.1	0.9	-0.2	-3.0	-5.3	-1.0
Cleveland	0.7	4.4	-3.5	3.0	1.4	1.1	-2.0
Cumbria	-1.2	3.0	-5.4	1.5	5.7	-4.2	0.7
Derbyshire	0.2	5.0	-4.1	1.7	2.0	2.8	1.1
Devon and Cornwall	1.4	1.3	-2.8	0.3	-0.5	3.1	0.9
Dorset	-0.2	9.2	-9.2	3.6	-2.0	1.5	1.5
Durham	1.8	2.8	2.5	4.9	1.6	2.9	5.1
Dyfed-Powys	0.0	6.7	-5.9	3.6	3.9	-5.8	8.4
Essex	3.0	n/a	n/a	0.0	-0.1	-5.2	7.1
Gloucestershire	1.3	5.8	-6.7	1.1	-1.8	3.4	1.6
Greater Manchester	4.1	3.2	-2.2	-1.0	-2.4	-1.9	5.0
Gwent	-1.3	1.5	0.5	23.7	6.5	3.6	1.2
Hampshire	-0.2	3.4	0.1	3.9	1.7	-0.6	1.2
Hertfordshire	2.7	12.3	1.1	-4.1	1.0	-0.6	1.0
Humberside	-1.4	2.1	-0.5	1.1	0.9	3.1	-2.4
Kent	1.9	6.9	-3.5	1.6	2.1	-2.2	1.1
Lancashire	2.3	1.7	0.3	1.9	1.4	3.0	-1.3
Leicestershire	0.6	0.5	3.9	5.3	n/a	n/a	n/a
Lincolnshire	1.4	n/a	n/a	1.6	3.1	-3.1	0.1
Merseyside	3.1	1.6	-2.5	-5.2	-0.3	4.3	-0.2
Metropolitan Police	-0.8	-1.3	1.0	-1.6	-4.5	-2.3	4.1
Norfolk	1.6	3.6	-2.4	2.9	2.9	-1.5	3.6
North Wales	1.0	4.1	-0.1	-1.5	0.0	-1.8	7.6
North Yorkshire	-2.3	1.7	-3.1	2.0	3.8	2.5	-1.1
Northamptonshire	1.6	5.3	-7.5	0.6	2.7	2.2	0.9
Northumbria	6.0	8.4	-5.1	1.1	0.7	2.8	0.1
Nottinghamshire	1.9	5.6	-3.0	3.1	0.0	2.8	-0.7
South Wales	0.9	-4.8	2.5	-2.0	0.5	0.6	3.6
South Yorkshire	2.5	6.0	1.1	1.5	2.8	0.6	-0.6
Staffordshire	3.0	3.8	-4.3	2.5	-4.0	6.6	2.7
Suffolk	0.5	0.4	-7.2	5.5	1.5	0.6	3.1
Surrey	2.9	9.6	-5.1	-1.0	-0.9	0.2	7.1
Sussex	1.0	5.3	-0.6	5.4	1.1	-1.2	-2.6
Thames Valley Police	4.4	5.3	-3.3	0.0	0.0	-2.9	7.1
Warwickshire	2.7	2.3	-9.3	-1.6	-1.7	-0.2	3.1
West Mercia	4.0	3.6	-4.6	1.9	1.8	0.8	-0.2
West Midlands	0.0	2.2	1.7	-0.9	1.3	0.0	-0.2
West Yorkshire	0.3	2.4	-0.8	6.5	1.6	-4.4	-0.5
Wiltshire	1.5	6.9	-10.9	0.2	-2.3	13.3	-2.2
Total	1.2	-1.1	2.1	0.6	-0.5	-0.2	1.8

Notes:
1993–94 to 1998–99—CIPFA Police Statistics Actuals
1999–2000—CIPFA Police Statistics Estimates
Real terms increase based on Treasury GDP Deflators published on 23 December 1999

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers there were in the Avon and Somerset force in each year from 1985 to 1999, giving figures on a quarterly basis from 1995 onwards; and if he will make a statement. [105094]

Mr. Boateng: The information available is set out in the table. Since 1995 police numbers have been collected only twice a year—in March and September—so as to reduce administrative burdens on the police.

Avon and Somerset constabulary police numbers—1985 to 1999

	Number of officers	
Year	As at 31 March	As at 30 September
1985	2,982	—
1986	2,958	—
1987	3,009	—
1988	3,013	—
1989	3,014	—
1990	3,094	—
1991	3,092	—
1992	3,081	—
1993	3,068	—
1994	3,033	—
1995	3,000	2,986
1996	2,981	3,004
1997	2,989	2,973
1998	2,976	2,966
1999	2,999	Not yet available

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of police officers *(a)* per head of population and *(b)* per notifiable

offence, in each year from 1992 to 1999, in each English county and Metropolitan area, listing these in each case in descending order. [105096]

Mr. Boateng: The estimates are given in the following tables. Owing to the structure of police forces, the areas quoted are police force areas rather than counties.

1992

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
London (City of)	119
Surrey	32
Merseyside	31
Metropolitan police	30
Wiltshire	29
Hertfordshire	29
Suffolk	27
Cumbria	26
West Mercia	26
North Yorkshire	26
Devon and Cornwall	25
Essex	25
Sussex	25
Dorset	25
Lincolnshire	24
Lancashire	24
Cheshire	24
Staffordshire	22
Warwickshire	22
South Yorkshire	22
Norfolk	21
West Midlands	21
Hampshire	21
Durham	21
Northamptonshire	19
Gloucestershire	19
Derbyshire	19
Kent	19
Thames Valley	19
Leicestershire	19
Cambridgeshire	19
Bedfordshire	18
Greater Manchester	18
Avon and Somerset	18
Cleveland	18
West Yorkshire	17
Humberside	16
Northumbria	15
Nottinghamshire	14

1993

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
London (City of)	147
Merseyside	33
Surrey	32
Metropolitan police	31
Wiltshire	30
Hertfordshire	30
Suffolk	29
Cumbria	27
Sussex	27
Essex	26
Dorset	25
West Mercia	25
Devon and Cornwall	24
North Yorkshire	24
Lancashire	24
Cheshire	24
Lincolnshire	23
Warwickshire	22
Norfolk	22
Hampshire	22

1993

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
Staffordshire	22
West Midlands	21
Durham	21
Northamptonshire	20
Derbyshire	20
Bedfordshire	20
Kent	19
Greater Manchester	19
South Yorkshire	19
Cambridgeshire	19
Thames Valley	19
Cleveland	19
Gloucestershire	19
Leicestershire	18
Avon and Somerset	17
West Yorkshire	17
Northumbria	17
Nottinghamshire	15
Humberside	14

1994

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
London (City of)	169
Surrey	36
Merseyside	34
Wiltshire	33
Metropolitan police	32
Suffolk	31
Hertfordshire	31
Sussex	28
Essex	28
Cumbria	28
Devon and Cornwall	27
Norfolk	26
Cheshire	25
Lincolnshire	25
Lancashire	25
Warwickshire	25
West Mercia	25
Staffordshire	24
Dorset	23
Hampshire	23
West Midlands	22
Bedfordshire	22
Durham	21
North Yorkshire	21
Derbyshire	21
Thames Valley	21
Greater Manchester	21
Cambridgeshire	20
Northamptonshire	20
Kent	20
South Yorkshire	19
Gloucestershire	19
Leicestershire	18
Avon and Somerset	18
Northumbria	18
Cleveland	17
West Yorkshire	17
Nottinghamshire	15
Humberside	15

1995

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
London (City of)	155
Surrey	38
Wiltshire	35
Metropolitan police	34

1995

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
Suffolk	31
Hertfordshire	30
Merseyside	30
Essex	30
Cumbria	28
Devon and Cornwall	28
Norfolk	27
Sussex	27
Cheshire	26
Warwickshire	26
Lancashire	26
West Mercia	26
Lincolnshire	25
Staffordshire	24
Hampshire	24
Dorset	24
Durham	23
West Midlands	22
Bedfordshire	22
Derbyshire	22
Thames Valley	22
Greater Manchester	21
Gloucestershire	21
North Yorkshire	20
Northamptonshire	20
Kent	20
South Yorkshire	20
Leicestershire	20
Avon and Somerset	20
Cambridgeshire	19
Northumbria	19
Cleveland	18
West Yorkshire	18
Humberside	16
Nottinghamshire	15

1996

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
London (City of)	180
Surrey	39
Wiltshire	34
Metropolitan police	32
Hertfordshire	31
Suffolk	31
Merseyside	30
Cheshire	30
Essex	29
Devon and Cornwall	28
Cumbria	28
Durham	27
Sussex	26
Lancashire	26
Dorset	25
Norfolk	25
Warwickshire	25
Hampshire	25
West Mercia	25
Lincolnshire	24
Staffordshire	24
North Yorkshire	23
West Midlands	22
Derbyshire	22
Bedfordshire	22
Northumbria	22
Thames Valley	21
Greater Manchester	21
Gloucestershire	21
Kent	21
Leicestershire	20
South Yorkshire	20

1996

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
Northamptonshire	20
West Yorkshire	19
Avon and Somerset	19
Cleveland	18
Cambridgeshire	18
Nottinghamshire	16
Humberside	16

1997

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
London (City of)	167
Surrey	42
Hertfordshire	35
Wiltshire	35
Cheshire	34
Metropolitan police	34
Merseyside	34
Suffolk	33
Essex	33
Cumbria	32
Durham	30
Devon and Cornwall	30
Dorset	29
Hampshire	28
Sussex	28
Lincolnshire	28
Lancashire	27
Norfolk	27
North Yorkshire	27
West Mercia	27
Kent	27
Northumbria	26
Warwickshire	26
West Midlands	25
Staffordshire	25
Derbyshire	24
South Yorkshire	24
Leicestershire	24
Gloucestershire	24
Thames Valley	23
Bedfordshire	23
Cleveland	23
Greater Manchester	23
Northamptonshire	22
Cambridgeshire	22
West Yorkshire	21
Avon and Somerset	21
Nottinghamshire	18
Humberside	17

Note:
Based on police officers at 31 March

Year ending March 1999

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
London (City of)	129
Surrey	46
Hertfordshire	37
Durham	35
Wiltshire	35
Cheshire	35
Suffolk	35
Metropolitan police	34
Essex	33
Devon and Cornwall	33
Merseyside	32
Cumbria	32
Lancashire	31
Hampshire	30

Year ending March 1999

Police force	*Officers per 1,000 offences*
West Mercia	29
Dorset	29
Kent	29
Northumbria	29
Lincolnshire	29
North Yorkshire	28
Norfolk	27
Staffordshire	26
West Midlands	26
Sussex	26
South Yorkshire	25
Warwickshire	25
Gloucestershire	25
Leicestershire	24
Derbyshire	24
Bedfordshire	24
Thames Valley	23
Avon and Somerset	23
Cleveland	22
Cambridgeshire	21
Northamptonshire	20
Greater Manchester	20
West Yorkshire	20
Nottinghamshire	18
Humberside	17

Notes:

1. Based on police officers at 31 March 1999
2. New counting rules and offence coverage for recorded crime were introduced on 1 April 1998
3. Figures are based on an estimate of offences which would have been recorded had the old counting rules been in place

1992

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
London (City of)	20,460.9
Metropolitan police	387.8
Merseyside	320.1
Greater Manchester	272.6
Cleveland	267.5
West Midlands	265.5
West Yorkshire	245.7
Northumbria	241.9
Cumbria	239.6
Humberside	235.8
South Yorkshire	232.1
Durham	231.7
Nottinghamshire	229.3
Lancashire	229.2
Surrey	228.3
Gloucestershire	220.9
Avon and Somerset	217.4
Wiltshire	217.3
Sussex	210.6
Staffordshire	209.1
Leicestershire	205.5
Warwickshire	205.1
Bedfordshire	204.1
Lincolnshire	202.3
Kent	201.5
Hertfordshire	201.1
Northamptonshire	[illegible]
Essex	[illegible]
Dorset	195.8
Cheshire	195.4
Devon and Cornwall	193.5
North Yorkshire	192.5
Hampshire	191.5
Thames Valley	190.2
Suffolk	189.2

1992

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
Norfolk	188.4
Cambridgeshire	188.1
West Mercia	188.1
Derbyshire	182.8

1993

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
London (City of)	20,004.8
Metropolitan police	378.2
Merseyside	322.1
Greater Manchester	274.7
West Midlands	264.4
Cleveland	264.1
Northumbria	247.9
Cumbria	244.5
West Yorkshire	241.6
South Yorkshire	232.9
Humberside	231.6
Nottinghamshire	228.1
Durham	228.0
Lancashire	227.5
Wiltshire	221.2
Surrey	220.4
Bedfordshire	219.4
Avon and Somerset	214.1
Gloucestershire	213.0
Sussex	210.7
Warwickshire	208.5
Staffordshire	207.6
Kent	204.8
Northamptonshire	204.4
Lincolnshire	203.0
Hertfordshire	201.9
Leicestershire	201.8
Essex	198.9
Cheshire	197.5
Dorset	197.1
Thames Valley	194.6
Derbyshire	194.0
North Yorkshire	193.7
Devon and Cornwall	192.4
Hampshire	191.7
Suffolk	189.8
Norfolk	189.6
Cambridgeshire	189.2
West Mercia	187.2

1994

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
London (City of)	23,092.8
Metropolitan police	375.0
Merseyside	324.6
Greater Manchester	270.7
West Midlands	266.6
Cleveland	255.2
Northumbria	249.6
West Yorkshire	241.0
Cumbria	239.5
South Yorkshire	231.8
Humberside	231.3
Durham	227.8
Nottinghamshire	227.1
Lancashire	224.3
Wiltshire	218.2
Surrey	216.8
Bedfordshire	214.5
Gloucestershire	214.1
Warwickshire	212.6

1994

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
Avon and Somerset	210.5
Sussex	210.0
Staffordshire	209.9
Kent	204.5
Leicestershire	202.3
Lincolnshire	201.9
Hertfordshire	198.8
Northamptonshire	198.3
Essex	197.9
Cheshire	196.7
Thames Valley	196.3
Dorset	195.3
Derbyshire	192.1
Devon and Cornwall	191.7
Hampshire	190.9
Norfolk	189.7
West Mercia	186.6
Suffolk	186.4
Cambridgeshire	186.4
North Yorkshire	182.3

1995

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
London (City of)	22,559.3
Metropolitan police	370.4
Merseyside	323.3
Greater Manchester	272.9
West Midlands	266.5
Cleveland	257.0
Northumbria	249.5
West Yorkshire	240.3
Cumbria	238.1
South Yorkshire	232.7
Humberside	229.4
Lancashire	226.1
Nottinghamshire	225.5
Durham	222.7
Surrey	217.8
Wiltshire	216.3
Gloucestershire	213.8
Staffordshire	211.7
Bedfordshire	208.8
Avon and Somerset	207.3
Warwickshire	205.2
Sussex	203.6
Kent	202.4
Leicestershire	202.0
Hertfordshire	200.6
Lincolnshire	199.4
Cheshire	198.8
Essex	196.2
Northamptonshire	195.3
Dorset	193.0
Thames Valley	192.6
Hampshire	189.5
Derbyshire	189.0
Devon and Cornwall	188.5
Cambridgeshire	184.7
West Mercia	184.5
Suffolk	184.3
Norfolk	182.3
North Yorkshire	180.1

1996

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
London (City of)	16,637.6
Metropolitan police	366.8
Merseyside	307.5

1996

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
West Midlands	271.9
Greater Manchester	269.1
Northumbria	254.4
Cleveland	253.6
West Yorkshire	244.4
South Yorkshire	235.4
Durham	230.5
Humberside	229.5
Cumbria	227.5
Nottinghamshire	224.8
Lancashire	222.7
Surrey	212.3
Sussex	212.2
Staffordshire	209.5
Leicestershire	208.1
Bedfordshire	207.6
Wiltshire	207.4
Gloucestershire	206.1
Cheshire	204.8
Avon and Somerset	204.7
Kent	201.8
Hertfordshire	200.7
Warwickshire	197.3
Northamptonshire	193.8
Hampshire	193.4
Essex	192.6
Devon and Cornwall	189.5
Lincolnshire	188.9
Dorset	187.9
Derbyshire	184.8
Norfolk	182.3
North Yorkshire	182.2
Thames Valley	182.1
West Mercia	180.6
Cambridgeshire	180.0
Suffolk	175.2

1997

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
London (City of)	16,514.9
Metropolitan police	355.9
Merseyside	296.4
West Midlands	269.7
Greater Manchester	268.5
Cleveland	261.0
Northumbria	255.6
West Yorkshire	247.4
South Yorkshire	242.3
Durham	240.3
Cumbria	233.2
Humberside	230.0
Lancashire	227.7
Nottinghamshire	225.1
Leicestershire	211.1
Sussex	211.0
Kent	210.2
Staffordshire	209.3
Cheshire	209.1
Surrey	208.9
Gloucestershire	204.9
Hertfordshire	204.9
Avon and Somerset	204.2
Bedfordshire	200.4
Hampshire	198.2
Essex	196.6
Northamptonshire	196.3
Lincolnshire	195.5
Wiltshire	195.4
Dorset	189.2
Cambridgeshire	187.6

1997

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
Derbyshire	186.9
Devon and Cornwall	185.8
Warwickshire	185.7
Norfolk	185.4
West Mercia	183.1
North Yorkshire	183.1
Thames Valley	180.5
Suffolk	179.6

1998

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
London (City of)	15,924.5
Metropolitan police	345.0
Merseyside	296.8
West Midlands	270.8
Greater Manchester	269.8
Cleveland	266.0
Northumbria	262.7
Durham	249.1
West Yorkshire	244.4
South Yorkshire	243.9
Cumbria	237.2
Lancashire	228.6
Humberside	227.9
Nottinghamshire	225.1
Staffordshire	217.1
Leicestershire	213.8
Kent	208.7
Cheshire	208.4
Surrey	207.1
Sussex	206.3
Avon and Somerset	202.8
Hertfordshire	201.5
Hampshire	199.1
Gloucestershire	198.4
Bedfordshire	196.5
Wiltshire	194.9
Essex	193.4
Lincolnshire	193.4
Northamptonshire	193.4
Dorset	192.1
Devon and Cornwall	192.0
North Yorkshire	186.1
Warwickshire	184.6
Derbyshire	184.2
Norfolk	184.0
Cambridgeshire	183.6
Thames Valley	182.8
West Mercia	179.8
Suffolk	179.2

1999

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
London (City of)	14,862.7
Metropolitan police	342.4
Merseyside	297.9
West Midlands	278.3
Northumbria	268.5
Greater Manchester	264.8
Durham	257.7
Cleveland	254.7
South Yorkshire	242.8
West Yorkshire	236.1
Cumbria	228.8
Lancashire	227.7
Humberside	223.2
Nottinghamshire	215.5

1999

Police force	*Officers per 100,000 population*
Leicestershire	214.5
Surrey	211.9
Staffordshire	211.0
Cheshire	210.8
Kent	204.4
Avon and Somerset	202.9
Hertfordshire	197.8
Gloucestershire	197.4
Hampshire	197.1
Wiltshire	192.0
Sussex	191.4
Essex	189.8
Bedfordshire	188.5
Northamptonshire	186.4
Devon and Cornwall	186.1
Dorset	186.0
Lincolnshire	184.0
Derbyshire	182.2
North Yorkshire	181.2
Warwickshire	180.3
West Mercia	179.8
Thames Valley	179.7
Cambridgeshire	178.9
Suffolk	178.5
Norfolk	176.4

Notes:

1. Based on police officers at 31 March
2. City of London figures are based on resident population

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers there were in South Somerset in each year from 1995 to 1999; and if he will make a statement. [105095]

Mr. Boateng: I am informed by the Chief Constable that South Somerset falls within the East Somerset Territorial Division. The force is able to provide details of police strength for this Division only from 1997 following restructuring. These are set out as follows.

East Somerset Division

	Police officer numbers
April 1997	230
April 1998	243
April 1999	241
January 2000	236

Chechens (Asylum)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum have been received from people from Chechnya, and how many Chechens have arrived in the UK, since the start of hostilities in Chechnya. [104906]

Mrs. Roche: Information on people from Chechnya is not separately identified from Russian nationals and therefore the information requested is not available.

Mike Tyson

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons it has been decided to allow Mike Tyson to enter the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [105673]

Mr. Straw: Mike Tyson arrived in the United Kingdom on Sunday 16 January and was given leave to enter until 30 January, for the purposes of the scheduled contest on 29 January. He was admitted under an instruction to immigration officers which I announced on 13 January and which was made under schedule 2 of the Immigration Act 1971. Given the high profile nature of this case and the complex issues that it raised, I took the view that it would have been invidious for an individual immigration officer to have to weigh the competing considerations involved.

I was advised that the relevant Immigration Rule, which has been in place in this form since 1994, provides that normally persons with convictions for offences which in this country attract a maximum sentence of 12 months or more imprisonment are to be refused leave to enter, but leaves a discretion to allow entry if there are strong compassionate circumstances or the case is otherwise exceptional. I considered representations sent by Mr. Frank Warren against the background of this advice and concluded that there were no strong compassionate circumstances but there were other exceptional circumstances in this case which justified granting leave to enter to Mr. Tyson.

I took account, in particular, of evidence presented to me in these representations of the effects on small providers of ancillary services, some of whom could have been facing bankruptcy because they have invested heavily in the contest and who are innocent third parties. I also took account of the effect on business in the Manchester area and the inconvenience and disappointment of the many thousand members of the public who have purchased tickets for the fight in good faith, if entry had been refused and the contest cancelled at this notice.

Further, I was not satisfied that in practice this Immigration Rule has had consistent outcomes in the past; and took that into account in determining whether this case was exceptional. Persons seeking leave to enter the United Kingdom are not routinely asked whether they have relevant previous convictions on the landing card or otherwise (though they would be so asked if from countries requiring a pre-entry visa).

I have, therefore, asked for a full review to be carried out of the Rules and practice relating to admission of persons with previous convictions. I will report the outcome of this review to Parliament when it is completed.

Police-escorted Wide Loads

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the cost to *(a)* businesses and *(b)* the economy of the movement of police-escorted wide loads between 7am and 7pm. [105021]

Mr. Boateng: No such estimates have been made.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many journeys have been made in each of the last five years by police-escorted wide loads. [105020]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will require police-escorted wide loads to travel during the night. [105019]

Mr. Boateng: The timing of abnormal load movements is an operational matter for the chief officers of police of the forces concerned. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) has issued guidance to forces which allow night time movement of abnormal loads on motorways and linking dual carriageways. This is subject to individual chief officers of police being satisfied with the road safety of such movements. ACPO policy is to allow and facilitate the movement of abnormal loads on motorways at all times.

Crime Statistics (Lancashire)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the latest crime figures for Lancashire. [104154]

Mr. Boateng: The latest figures, covering the 12 months to September 1999, will be published tomorrow.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of illegal immigrants who arrived in the UK concealed in lorries in 1999. [104186]

Mrs. Roche: During the period January to November 1999, the Immigration Service dealt with 14,612 cases of illegal entrants. This figure comprises all those who have concealed themselves in vehicles (including lorries) or who have otherwise avoided the control. Separate figures for those concealed in lorries are not available.

Emergency Vehicles (Black Boxes)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reports he has received about police forces in EU member states which have installed black boxes in *(a)* police and *(b)* other emergency vehicles. [104844]

Mr. Boateng: We understand that the police service in Berlin uses black boxes, but are not aware of any European Union member state other than the United Kingdom in which other emergency vehicles have black boxes.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police forces have installed black boxes in police vehicles. [104845]

Mr. Boateng: No forces have installed black boxes in police vehicles that are currently in operational use. The Metropolitan police force intends installing black box recording devices in immediate response and armed response vehicles this year.

Police Pursuit Driving

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the recommendations of the Association of Chief Police Officers' report of September 1998 on police pursuit driving have been implemented; and if he will make a statement. [104846]

Mr. Boateng: I understand that most forces have adopted the majority of the 33 recommendations in the Association of Chief Police Officers report "Police Pursuit Driver Training". The recommendations which had to be taken forward on a national basis are well advanced. National standardised police pursuit driver training courses will be available by early summer 2000.

Police Station Staff (Hillingdon)

Mr. Randall: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum number of (i) police officers and (ii) civilian employees on duty in each of the police stations in the Hillingdon Division of the Metropolitan Police Service on (1) 31 December 1999 and (2) 1 January 2000. [105183]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has provided the following information about staff deployed in Hillingdon Division:

(1) 31 December 1999

144 police officers were on duty for the 24-hour period starting 0600. Of these, the following numbers of constables were dedicated to patrolling their specific station areas, with the remainder performing pan-divisional duties:

Ruislip: 17
Uxbridge: 13
West Drayton: 14
Hayes: 22

(2) 1 January 2000

109 police officers were on duty for the 24-hour period starting 0600. Of these, the following numbers of constables were dedicated to patrolling their specific station areas, with the remainder performing pan-divisional duties:

Ruislip: 20
Uxbridge: 16
West Drayton: 17
Hayes: 23

On both dates, 13 civilians were deployed, all at Uxbridge police station.

The numbers of staff on duty on each date were above the normal minimum strengths for response policing.

Correspondence

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter of 18 August 1999, acknowledged on 26 August 1999 (reference 16888 /99), regarding allegations relating to experimental psychological research. [105154]

Mr. Boateng: I am extremely sorry for the delay in dealing with the hon. Gentleman's letter which, having been received, was mislaid within my Department. He kindly sent a duplicate earlier this month. The matters raised by his constituent are now being dealt with by the Secretary of State for Health, who will reply to him directly in the very near future.

Police Complaints Authority

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his Department will make inquiries regarding the delay in the hon. Member for Walsall, North being informed by the Police Complaints Authority about a case concerning a constituent (ref. (D) 1999 100345). [104813]

Mr. Boateng: I understand that the Police Complaints Authority received the report of the police investigation of this case on 26 November last year, later than the authority originally envisaged. The Authority expects to review the case within the next two weeks and will then write to the complainant with its conclusions, copying the letter to my hon. Friend.

Acquittals

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) in what proportion of contested cases triable either way, which were tried in the crown court for each of the last five years where data are available, the defendant was acquitted *(a)* by the jury after deliberation and *(b)* on the direction of the judge; [104232]

(2) in what proportion of contested cases triable either way, which were tried in the magistrates' court for each of the last five years where data are available, the defendant was acquitted. [104231]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No regular statistics are collected on this. However, there is some information available from the baseline data collected by the Home Office in 1998 for the evaluation of the pilot schemes to reduce delay in the criminal justice system. In a sample of contested trials for either-way offences in the six pilot areas, 40 per cent. of defendants were acquitted by the jury and 5 per cent. were acquitted on the direction of the judge in the Crown Court. The acquittal rate in the magistrates court was 32 per cent.

Crime Fighting Fund

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police forces have applied for funding for recruitment from the Crime Fighting Fund; and what level of funding has been bid for in each case. [104375]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Forty three forces have bid for a total of 8,220 officers over the three year period of the Crime Fighting Fund Recruitment Scheme. The total number of officers bid for exceeds the 5,000 officers for which funding will be available under the scheme. We are currently assessing the bids to determine whether they meet the criteria laid down in the bidding guidelines which were issued to forces and a copy placed in the Library of the House on 2 December 1999.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Peru

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Peruvian Government in support of the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Commission and encourage the pardoning of innocent prisoners. [104399]

Mr. Battle: We have made a number of representations to the Peruvian authorities in support of the Ad Hoc Commission on Human Rights. This issue

was raised in November 1998 with the Peruvian Ambassador to London, when the Ad Hoc Commission's mandate was last up for renewal. More recently, FCO officials discussed this with the Deputy Ombudsman of Peru, Dr. Gino Costa, when he visited the UK in November 1999 on an FCO Sponsored Visit. Since March 1998, we have contributed £141,960 from the FCO's Human Rights Project Fund to assist the Ombudsman's office and the Ad Hoc Commission with their important work. This funding helped to ensure that the Ad Hoc Commission could discharge its responsibilities in an effective manner for the duration of its mandate, which expired on 31 December 1999.

Responsibility for the recommendation of Presidential pardons has been passed on to the National Human Rights Council at the Ministry of Justice. On 25 December 1999, President Fujimori granted pardons to 12 more people imprisoned for alleged terrorism offences. According to the Ombudsman, 48 of the Ad Hoc Commission's recommendations for pardon have yet to be approved. The British Embassy in Lima will continue to work closely with the Ombudsman and provide practical support for its work and research.

United Arab Emirates

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning the measures taken by the United Arab Emirates authorities to prevent the trafficking in and employment of children under 14 years of age. [104413]

Mr. Hain: We spoke recently to the UAE authorities about this issue. They assured us that the existing legislation banning jockeys under the age of 15 was being enforced and that offenders would be prosecuted. This should discourage the previous practice of employing underage jockeys brought into the UAE from abroad.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the UAE Government in respect of its compliance with the ban on child jockeys. [104832]

Mr. Hain: We have recently spoken to the UAE authorities about this issue. They have assured us that they are enforcing the existing legislation banning jockeys under the age of 15 and will prosecute offenders.

Drugs Trade (Latin America)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what international action his Department has taken to combat the drugs trade, with particular reference to drugs from Latin America. [104453]

Mr. Battle: The FCO co-ordinates the UK's international counter-drugs activities, to reduce the production of Class A drugs and their trafficking to the UK and Europe. During the financial year 1998–99 the FCO spent £5,900,000 on projects in support of these aims. On 5 January I announced a contribution of £2.286 million towards a range of projects under the UN International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP). This consists of:

£470,000 to strengthen the counter-drugs capabilities of law enforcement agencies in Bulgaria, Romania and Macedonia.

£216,000 to support a Law Enforcement Adviser to UNDCP.

£350,000 to a precursor control project and other law enforcement measures in Bolivia.

£350,000 to support an integrated monitoring system of illicit cultivation in Columbia.

£500,000 to protect to monitor coca leaf production in Peru.

£100,000 to phase II of a project to promote the regional co-ordination of drug control activities in the Caribbean.

Up to £300,000 for UNDCP's strategic studies of the Afghanistan opium trade and the annual Afghanistan opium poppy survey.

Sudan

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department has taken to encourage the Sudan to implement the Chemical Weapons Convention. [104464]

Mr. Hain: Sudan acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) on 24 May 1999. It has not yet submitted its declarations as required under the Convention to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Until it does so the OPCW or States Parties is unable to advise or encourage the Sudan on implementation. The UK along with EU partners are seeking clarification of the Sudanese accession statement as submitted to the UN.

Morocco

Mr. Pollard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to visit the Kingdom of Morocco. [104430]

Mr. Hain: I made a productive and rewarding visit to Morocco in December of last year. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs has been invited to visit and will take this up when a suitable opportunity arises.

Iran

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of Iran's capability to produce *(a)* nuclear and *(b)* chemical and biological weapons. [104880]

Mr. Hain: In conjunction with other Government Departments, we regularly assess the status of efforts by a number of countries to develop or acquire weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. Such assessments draw heavily on intelligence sources and we are therefore unable to comment further.

Iran is a Non-Nuclear-Weapon State Party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention. We continue to encourage Iran to respect these treaties and to comply fully with its obligations under them.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will ask Iran officially to recognise Israel. [104879]

Mr. Hain: The Foreign Secretary had lengthy discussions with the Iranian Foreign Minister about the situation in the Middle East and the peace process in the course of Dr. Kharrazi's recent visit. We pressed him for Iran to take a more positive position on the peace process. Iranian recognition of Israel does not look likely for the moment.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received that persons executed for criminal offences in Iran are political dissidents. [104780]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners have on a number of occasions reminded the Iranian Government of our opposition to the death penalty, and our concern that it be used with utmost restraint. Our information is that the majority of executions in Iran are for drug-related offences. We and our EU partners have raised with Iran our concern over particular death sentences, notably against members of the Baha'i community and against students involved in the July 1999 demonstrations.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to Iran concerning its attempts to obtain fissile material and technology for weapons development. [104784]

Mr. Hain: We regularly raise with the Iranians our concerns over reports that Iran has a nuclear weapons programme, most recently during last week's visit to the UK by Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs. The visit resulted in a Joint Declaration, signed by Dr. Kharrazi and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, in which the UK and Iran agreed to continue mutual co-operation to reinforce international efforts aimed at eliminating weapons of mass destruction and reiterated the importance of implementing the international conventions to which both have adhered, including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will press the Iranian Government to grant equal opportunities in education and employment to Baha'i, Christian and Jewish Iranians. [104781]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners regularly raise our concerns over certain Iranian human rights policies with the Iranian authorities. The EU sponsored United Nations General Assembly resolution on human rights in Iran adopted on 18 November featured prominently international concerns about treatment of religious minorities. The Iranian authorities are fully aware that we and our EU partners consider persecution on religious grounds to be unacceptable.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the United States Government regarding the foreign policy of Iran. [104769]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners regularly discuss policy towards Iran, with the US as well as matters relating to Iranian foreign policy, as I did in Washington last month.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many reports he has received in the last two years regarding the activities of the Revolutionary Guards in Iran. [104998]

Mr. Hain: Our Embassy in Tehran provides comprehensive reporting on the full range of public policy and other issues in Iran, including those relating to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the names of people currently awaiting extradition from Iran to the United Kingdom. [105005]

Mr. Hain: There is no extradition treaty between the United Kingdom and Iran. We are not aware of anybody facing extradition from Iran to the United Kingdom.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Iranian Government concerning the *(a)* financing, *(b)* equipping, *(c)* provision of training locations and *(d)* provision of refuge from extradition to Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad by the Iranian Government. [105004]

Mr. Hain: Iranian opposition to the Middle East peace process and support for groups that oppose the peace process featured prominently in the discussions between the Foreign Secretary and his Iranian counterpart during his visit from 10–12 January. The Iranian authorities are fully aware of the importance that we and our EU partners attach to the Middle East peace process.

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to Iran calling for the trial of the 13 Iranian Jews accused of spying to be held in public. [104790]

Mr. Hain: We and our EU partners have repeatedly stressed to the Iranian authorities the importance we attach to this issue. We have also stressed our belief that those detained should either be released or granted a speedy, fair and open trial. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary both raised this issue with Dr. Kharrazi during his visit from 10–12 January. Dr. Kharrazi said that those detained would receive a fair trial with access to lawyers and their families. We will continue to monitor the situation.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he made to the Iranian Foreign Minister during his recent visit to the UK regarding *(a)* human rights in Iran, including the human rights of the Jewish community and *(b)* support for the Middle Eastern peace process; and if he will make a statement. [104905]

Mr. Hain: Human rights and Iranian attitudes to the Middle East peace process featured prominently in the discussions between the Foreign Secretary and his Iranian counterpart Dr. Kamal Kharrazi during the visit to London on 10–12 January.

Indonesia

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the status of the EU arms embargo on Indonesia. [105843]

Mr. Hain: The EU Common Position of 16 September 1999 imposing restrictive measures, including an arms embargo, against Indonesia for a fixed period of four months, expired on 17 January 2000. Following the expiry of the embargo all applications for the export of equipment on the Military List to Indonesia will be considered on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the national criteria on arms exports and the EU Code of Conduct.

The UK, together with our EU partners, continues to monitor closely the performance of the new Indonesian administration and in particular the actions of the Indonesian military.

Libyan Scud Missiles

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when *(a)* he and *(b)* his office were first informed of the interception of Libyan scud missile parts at Gatwick Airport. [105013]

Mr. Robin Cook: I am updated regularly on Libya's ambitions and efforts to acquire weapons technology. I am not briefed on the details of individual HMCE operations nor would I expect to be. I was given a full account of this specific operation following the disclosure on 9 January of some details of it to the media.

I took our concerns about Libyan weapons programmes into account when reviewing policy on Libya before my statement in the House on 7 July 1999.

In May 1999 HMCE initiated their inquiry with regard to this consignment. FCO officials were aware of the grounds for suspicion. HMCE sought the assistance of FCO officials on 16 June in pursuing their investigation with the Maltese authorities. MOD officials inspected the consignment on 13 July. FCO officials received confirmation on 29 July that the contents were consistent with Scud parts. Libya has possessed since the 1970s a number of Soviet-supplied Scud B missiles with a range limited to a maximum of 300km. The parts seized at Gatwick could be applicable to the Scud B or other Scud derivatives, but would not have enabled Libya to extend the range of its existing Scud missile arsenal.

I congratulate HMCE on their vigilance in successfully detaining this shipment.

North Korea

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the status and future of diplomatic relations with North Korea. [105016]

Mr. Battle: At present, the United Kingdom is not planning to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea. We actively seek continued dialogue with North Korea and continue to press North Korea for progress on issues of international concern, such as missile proliferation and human rights abuses. Our future stance will largely depend on North Korea's willingness to address these long-standing concerns.

Chechnya

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps have been taken by British diplomatic representatives at the United Nations towards developing a strategy for peace in Chechnya. [104909]

Mr. Vaz: British diplomatic representatives at the UN have contributed to informal consultations of Security Council members on Chechnya, particularly the humanitarian aspects. Russia, a permanent member of the Security Council, has blocked any formal discussion or action on Chechnya.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Russian Government concerning their bombing campaign in Chechnya. [104903]

Mr. Vaz: We have repeatedly raised with the Russians our concerns about their bombing campaign in Chechnya. Most recently the Prime Minister raised this with Mr. Putin when they spoke on 20 December and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed it during telephone calls with Foreign Minister Ivanov on 31 December and 11 January.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what sources of information he has on the effect of the Russian bombardment of Chechnya. [105025]

Mr. Vaz: Independent reliable sources of information on the effect of Russian actions in Chechnya are scarce. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office uses a wide range of material to assess the situation. This comes from diplomatic, media, NGO and other sources.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish recent representations he has received concerning Government policy toward Russian action in Chechnya; and if he will make a statement. [104907]

Mr. Vaz: We have received representations on Russian actions in Chechnya from a wide number of sources including many letters from the public, from NGOs and from Members of both Houses.

It would be impractical to publish all of these, but the issues raised were well covered in the debates that have taken place in both Houses.

My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made statements in the past on the Government's position on Chechnya, most recently on 7 December, and will continue to do so.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what NATO observation has taken place of the hostilities in Chechnya. [104910]

Mr. Vaz: There is no direct NATO involvement in Chechnya. But NATO regularly assesses the situation there and frequent discussions take place among member states in the North Atlantic Council.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings have been held by *(a)* Diplomatic Service officials and *(b)* Ministers with

elected representatives of the Chechen people since the commencement of hostilities in Chechnya; and which Chechen representatives were involved. [104904]

Mr. Vaz: I have not met Chechen representatives. FCO officials had a meeting with two Chechen parliamentarians, Mr. Idigov and Mr. Magomedov, on 15 December to hear their views on the situation in Chechnya.

Classified Documents

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what criteria he uses to judge whether an author should be permitted access to classified material. [104707]

Mr. Robin Cook: The FCO follows Cabinet Office guidance on access to records. It does not give access to authors unless their intended publication is commissioned/sponsored or approved by Departments, and is seen to be research from which the FCO will benefit, and can be justified as being in the public interest and resources are available. Authors are normally cleared to the appropriate security level before any access is given.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who authorised the disclosure of information, contained in the book by Alan Judd, entitled, The Quest for C: Mansfield Cumming and the Founding of the Secret Service; and if he will make a statement. [104708]

Mr. Robin Cook: The disclosure of information in Mr. Judd's biography of Mansfield Cumming was made in accordance with an official authorisation given by SIS under section 7 (3) (b) of the Official Secrets Act 1989, and as defined in section 7 (5) of that Act.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 7 December regarding a constituent (ref. GV100/SG801). [104814]

Mr. Vaz: The Visa Correspondence Unit replied to my hon. Friend, the member for Walsall, North, on my behalf on 12 January 2000.

UK Embassies (Commerce)

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the value of business *(a)* directly and *(b)* indirectly won by the commercial departments of (i) UK embassies and consulates in EU member states and (ii) the UK embassy and consulates in the USA in each of the last five years. [105286]

Mr. Battle: The most recent independent report on commercial services provided by British diplomatic posts overseas was produced by the National Audit Office (NAO) in 1996. This report, which covered four countries in south east Asia, noted that the seven services which the NAO examined helped generate an estimated £345 million of additional business for British companies in 1994, at a cost of £4.5 million.

British Trade International was set up in 1999 to combine in one organisation the trade promotion work of the FCO and the DTI. British Trade International has identified 15 target markets, including Western Europe and the USA. Although we do not carry out quantitative assessments of the value of business won, we commission research from an independent research company, which shows an average 90 per cent. overall satisfaction rate in 1998 among customers of the commercial services provided by overseas posts worldwide.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 132W, on embassy costs, for what reasons the embassies in Rome and Bonn spend 9 per cent. and 2 per cent. respectively, on commercial work. [105255]

Mr. Hain: Commercial work in both Italy and Germany is concentrated in their commercial centres, such as Milan and Dusseldorf, rather than their capital cities.

Rome accounts for 23 per cent. of commercial work carried out in Italy and Bonn 3 per cent. in Germany.

Embassy Running Costs

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 132W, on embassy running costs, if he will break down the percentages listed under other activities. [105254]

Mr. Hain: The 'Other Activities' listed in the previous answer are made up of the following: (1) Economic, (2) Aid Administration, (3) Consular, (4) Work for other Government Departments, (5) Administration and Security and (6) Miscellaneous.

The percentages are broken down as follows:

Percentage

	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)*	*(5)*	*(6)*
European Union						
Vienna	2	0	3	5	43	0
Brussels	8	0	12	0	10	1
Copenhagen	4	0	4	0	27	1
Dublin	3	0	5	0	37	3
Helsinki	2	0	5	4	28	2
Paris	6	0	8	1	31	13
Bonn	19	0	0	1	43	10
Athens	10	0	8	2	38	4
Rome	7	4	7	2	40	8
Luxembourg						
Cy	5	0	5	0	37	2
The Hague	1	0	1	1	26	19
Lisbon	2	0	12	2	25	6
Madrid	5	0	10	0	33	12
Stockholm	3	0	3	4	23	1
USA						
Washington DC	4	2	7	3	37	11

Miscellaneous includes such things as Science and Technology, Agriculture, Culture and Labour.

It is not possible to break Miscellaneous down to its constituent parts.

WALES

Child Abuse

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when the Waterhouse report into abuse in North Wales children's homes will be published. [105099]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I shall publish the report of the North Wales Child Abuse Inquiry as soon as possible.

Public Appointments

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the public bodies to which he makes appointments. [103052]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I make one appointment to the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Wales.

In addition, the Secretary of State for Wales has power under their Royal Charters to make appointments to a number of public bodies which operate in relation to matters for which responsibility has transferred to the Assembly. Those bodies are considering whether their Royal Charters should be amended to transfer these powers to the Assembly, but that process is not yet complete.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103841]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department came into existence on 1 July 1999 following devolution in Wales. The planned complement of staff has not yet been recruited but we are working to ensure that our systems maximise productivity and effectiveness.

Theatres (Funding)

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he intends to meet the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to discuss National Lottery funding of theatre companies in Wales. [100199]

Mr. Hanson: The Secretary of State meets the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on a regular basis. National Lottery funding of theatre companies in Wales is not the responsibility of either my office or the Department for Culture Media and Sport, but is a matter for the relevant distributor in Wales.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to ensure that all those pensioners entitled to the Minimum Income Guarantee take it up. [104600]

Mr. Rooker: An announcement of our plans to encourage pensioners to take-up their entitlement to the Minimum Income Guarantee will be made shortly.

State Second Pension

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is his policy that, following the introduction of the State Second Pension, all employees below state pension age who have not contracted out of the state scheme will earn entitlements under the rules for the State Second Pension rather than SERPS; and if this is the assumption which underlies his estimates of the distributional impact of the reform. [104687]

Mr. Rooker: Following the introduction of State Second Pension, all employees below State Pension age, who have paid Class 1 National Insurance Contributions on earnings at or above the Lower Earnings Limit and who have not contracted out of the State scheme, will accrue entitlement to a second pension under the rules for the State Second Pension. Any SERPS entitlement they have already accrued will be preserved. So when a person reaches State Pension age they will receive, in addition to their basic Retirement Pension, a second pension made up of any preserved SERPS plus entitlement under State Second Pension.

State Second Pension will reform SERPS so that those with low earnings will get much more additional pension. All those earning between £3,432 (the annual Lower Earnings Limit) and £9,500 will accrue at least twice as much entitlement under State Second Pension than they would have done under SERPS. The highest proportionate gains will go to those on the lowest earnings.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost of backdating the State Second Pension to *(a)* 1978, *(b)* 1981, *(c)* 1986, *(d)* 1992 and *(e)* 1998 for carers in receipt of Invalid Care Allowance. [105251]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the costs which would result if the state second pension were backdated to *(a)* 1978, *(b)* 1981, *(c)* 1986, *(d)* 1992 and *(e)* 1998 for carers of ill, elderly or disabled relatives in receipt of Home Responsibilities Protection. [105252]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available.

Home Responsibilities Protection can currently be claimed at any time up to State Pension age for qualifying periods since 1978. Since only very small numbers have so far claimed Home Responsibilities Protection for caring for a sick or disabled person, any estimate based on our usual 1 per cent. sampling method would not be reliable.

Asset Sales

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the items in the National Assets Register sold by his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies since 16 February 1999, stating in each case the amount of money realised; if he will estimate the total amount raised from such sales to date; and if he will make a statement. [104486]

Mr. Rooker: The National Asset Register published in November 1997 showed the assets held by the Department, its agencies and associated public bodies to be 195 freehold properties, 54 historic leasehold properties, 59,500 personal computers, 24,400 printers and 2,853 vehicles.

The Department's freehold and historic leasehold properties were transferred to the private sector as part of two Private Finance Initiative deals. On 8 January 1998 the Department transferred the six properties in the Newcastle Estate (Newcastle Longbenton, Gosforth Broadway West, Newcastle Ponteland Road, Washington Emerson House, Newcastle Tyneview Park and Washington Durham House) to the Newcastle Estate Partnership. The Department did not receive a cash sum but will be charged rentals at a reduced rate for the period of the contract. On 1 April 1998 the remainder of the Departmental estate was transferred as part of the Private Sector Resource Initiative for Management of the Estate (PRIME). The Department received cash consideration of £250 million. In addition, the sale of vehicles in the period up to the end of January 1999 realised an estimated £2,223,458.

Following the transfer of properties, the Department no longer holds fixed assets of significant value. In the period from the beginning of February 1999 to the end of December 1999, the Department sold a small number of low value items such as personal computers and printers. In addition, sales of vehicles realised an estimated £794,998.

The estimated total cash raised from such sales to date is therefore £253,018,456.

Stakeholder Pension Credits

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what estimate he has made of the additional cost to the Exchequer of providing credits to a stakeholder pension for a parent with a child under the age of five years who stays at home to look after the child; [104873]

(2) what estimate he has made of the additional cost to the Exchequer of providing credits to a stakeholder pension for someone not in employment who looks after a dependent relative. [104874]

Mr. Rooker: We have no plans to provide credits to stakeholder pension schemes. Under our proposals for State Second Pension qualifying carers will be treated as if they had earnings of £9,500. This will, for the first time, give carers the chance to build up a second pension. A qualifying carer will be:

someone receiving Child Benefit for a child under six;

someone entitled to Invalid Care Allowance; or

someone given Home Responsibilities Protection because they were caring for a disabled person.

Assuming State Second Pension is introduced in 2002, the estimated gross costs of giving carers of disabled people and those receiving Child Benefit for a child aged under six State Second Pension entitlement are shown in the following table.

	2010	*2020*	*2030*	*2040*	*2050*
Carers of disabled	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.7
Carers of child under six	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.7	2.0
Total	0.0	0.1	0.3	1.1	2.7

Notes:

1. Figures, supplied by the Government Actuary's Department, are in £ billion at 1999–2000 prices. They make no allowance for income-related benefit offsets.
2. Figures are calculated to the nearest £100 million. Totals may include amounts of less than £100 million not otherwise shown in the table.
3. Real earnings growth of 1.5 per cent. per annum has been assumed.

Automated Credit Transfer

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out the assumptions about the proportion of benefit recipients opting to receive their benefits by automated credit transfer which underlie his estimate of a saving of £400 million on benefit delivery by 2005. [104148]

Mr. Rooker: The move to automated credit transfer as the normal method of payment from 2003 brings significant savings in DSS administrative costs. This is anticipated to be in the region of £400 million per year once the transition from current paper based methods of payment is complete, and the majority of benefit recipients have moved to ACT. Further savings on fraud are also expected. Estimates of these range from £140 million to £240 million.

One third of benefit recipients already choose to have their benefits paid by automated credit transfer, direct into to their bank accounts, and the vast majority—around 85 per cent.—already have access to a bank account.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many winter fuel payments were paid out before Christmas; how many eligible persons failed to receive payments before Christmas; if he will pay £10 compensation to each person receiving payments after Christmas; if he will estimate how much such compensation would cost; and if he will make a statement. [104317]

Angela Eagle: This winter, some 10.2 million Winter Fuel Payments were issued before Christmas 1999.

Of the payments issued, around five million were sent directly to Post Offices. For security reasons, Post Offices were advised to return any uncollected girocheques to the Benefits Agency on 20 December 1999 which would enable them to determine why the girocheques were not collected and issue replacements as necessary.

Information on those who remain unpaid will not be available until the end of January 2000.

There are no plans to pay compensation to people who may have received their payments after Christmas.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received from pensioners who reached pension age after 23 September in respect of the winter fuel allowance; and if he will make a statement. [104368]

Angela Eagle: 130 representations were received compared with the 10 million payments which have been made. This winter the qualifying week of 20 September was used to enable all those eligible to be identified and paid before Christmas.

Combined Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects the first combined pension forecasts to be issued, as described on page 89 of the Partnership in Pensions White Paper. [105151]

Mr. Rooker: The first combined forecasts will be issued to individuals in the Spring as part of a series of pilot exercises we have under way with private and public sector employers and pension providers.

We have announced that we want to make this service generally available to employers and pension providers from 2002. We expect to meet or better this target date.

National Insurance Staff

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes have been made in the past year to identity checks on staff issuing National Insurance numbers. [104612]

Mr. Rooker: A number of changes have been made in the past year to control procedures for the staff who are enabled to issue adult National Insurance numbers. Firstly, reductions have been made in the number of staff who have access to the allocation process. The introduction of these new procedures has reduced the number of people who are able to allocate new numbers from over 1,500 to less than 525.

We have also created a database of the staff who are able to allocate numbers. This allows checks to be made on exactly how many people have access to this process at any one time, who those people are, why they need access and how many National Insurance numbers any one individual has allocated. This process is controlled via a security procedure agreed between this Department and the Inland Revenue.

Finally we have introduced automatic security checks which enable managers to investigate whether staff have a continuing need to have access to the allocation process. The system will highlight unusual activity and prompt a Management check.

Remote Access Terminals

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many local authorities had installed remote access terminals *(a)* on the most recent date for which he has information and *(b)* at the end of March 1999. [104657]

Angela Eagle: By the 1 December 1999, when the Departmental 'Millennium Operating Regime' limiting IT development around the year 2000 came into effect, there were 349 Local Authorities (LAs) with 368 Remote Access Terminals (RATs). The comparable figure for March 1999 was 336 LAs with 362 RATs. We expect 393 LAs to have at least one RAT by the end of March 2000.

We have recently invited those LAs that have still not applied for a RAT to do so as they provide LAs with on-line access to benefit data held by the Benefits Agency that are needed to administer Housing and Council Tax benefits efficiently.

Personal Details Computer System

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many records were held on the Personal Details Computer System at *(a)* the start of January 1999 and *(b)* the end of December 1999. [104658]

Mr. Rooker: The number of records held on the Personal Details Computer System at the start of January 1999 was 11,796,041 and the end of December 1999 was 22,513,887.

Benefit Post Scheme

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if every local authority had been invited by the end of January 1999 to join his Department's scheme to ensure that benefit post is not redirected; and how many have joined. [104619]

Angela Eagle: The Royal Mail "do not redirect" service became legally operable from 1 February 1999. A circular was sent to all local authority housing benefit managers on 2 February 1999 describing the arrangements and inviting them to join the scheme.

At 14 January 2000, the Royal Mail had confirmed that 225 local authorities were using the service.

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103855]

Mr. Rooker: Delivering efficient and modern public services is a key part of our agenda for improving efficiency. Greater efficiency is being sought therefore within the public sector to ensure that the most effective results are obtained from available resources. The Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA) Cm 4315, includes a range of measures for taking this forward, both within the Department itself and in other public bodies.

Those measures which will help raise the Department's own productivity are as follows:

Reducing Fraud

"A new contract for welfare: Safeguarding Social Security" (Cm 4276) sets out our strategy for tackling fraud and error. It explains how the Department will shift the emphasis from detection to prevention of fraud and error in the Social Security system.

Work is under way to bring forward the other elements of the strategy by developing an integrated approach across the Department, and those other bodies with whom it works.

Better Quality Services

Better Quality Services (BQS) reviews are part of the Department's approach to Modernising Government. BQS is a cross-Government approach led by Cabinet Office, under which Government Departments must examine all

options to achieve best quality and value for money in delivering their services. Cabinet Office has approved a five year BQS Action Plan to review rigorously all functions across the Department. Our reviews will focus on end results, maximising potential for synergies in service delivery across the Department and delivering continuous improvement. We have completed reviews of IS/IT, procurement, consultancy, audit and finance and planning activities. 60 per cent. of services and activities will be reviewed by March 2003 in line with the PSA target.

Electronic Government

In 1997 my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that by October 2002, one quarter of dealings with the Government can be done by a member of the public electronically, through their telephone, TV or computer. The Modernising Government White Paper (MGWP) (www.citu.gov.uk/moderngov.whitepaper/4310.htm) added additional capability milestones of 50 per cent. by 2005 and 100 per cent. by 2008. Progress is monitored every six months, and put on the web (www.citu.gov.uk/25percent menu.htm).

This White Paper committed the Department to delivering a Corporate IT Strategy that will enable stronger co-ordination on key issues such as Government Websites, Call Centres, Smart Cards, Digital TV and the inter-operability of Government IT Systems. The aim of the Strategy is to further a more coherent approach to the development of the Government's use of IT, and its integration with that of the wider public sector.

The Strategy, which will be completed in March, is being developed by the Information Age Government Champions team drawn from all Government departments. The website (www.iagchampions.gov.uk) has their terms of reference and has, or will, publish for consultation the guidelines on

Call centres

Digital television

Government on the Internet

Data standards

Smartcards

At the infrastructure level, we are preparing our key objectives for data management and established technology frameworks, and we are developing public sector coherence through the use of our Government Secure Intranet.

Reducing Sickness absence

Progress includes an improved model for measuring sickness absence, detailed analyses of the patterns and causes of sickness, issuing guidance to managers and raising awareness within the Department. Each Agency has also been set a target to reduce absences by December 1999 as part of a contribution towards meeting the overall PSA target.

Improving procurement

(i) DSS spends about 50 per cent. of its running costs on goods and services. In 1998–99 this amounted to about £1.5 billion.

(ii) DSS has adopted a strategic approach to supply management. A Supply Strategy Steering Group (SSSG) with senior cross-Business Unit representation was established in 1997 to steer, develop and articulate DSS policy and strategy for use of external resources in the provision of business services. Martin Sykes was appointed Director of Supply Strategy (DoSS) from the private sector on 1 June 1998, he reports to the Departmental Board (DB) and sits on the ITSA Board.

(iii) Past exercises to test DSS supply requirements against the market have led to a significant proportion of DSS support services now being provided by external suppliers—significant areas of business currently provided in this way are:

Estate management, accommodation and office services;

Information Systems/Information Technology operations; and

Medical services.

(iv) In partnership with the private sector the Department is seeking to support Modern Service delivery, for example by the replacement of Information Systems/Information Technology systems through the ACCORD project.

(v) A fundamental review of procurement and supply arrangements across DSS recommended changes which were approved by DB in November 1999. The review addressed the requirements of Better Quality Services and focused on ways to improve the quality of the procurement service and develop our ability to contribute to business objectives, particularly Modern Service delivery. It identified ways to streamline the organisation, develop and focus expertise and improve assurance and VFM in supply arrangements. A key initiative will reorganise the current procurement units which support specific Business Units or office complexes into a coordinated, streamlined corporate structure. The new structure will provide better quality procurement services. It will also eliminate duplication, giving local managers opportunity to redeploy staff or realise efficiency savings. Plans to implement these recommendations by end September 2000 are being developed.

(vi) We have completed a Contract Management Development Project and developed a strategy for contract management and initiatives to strengthen contract management in DSS.

(vii) An External Resources Project has examined our use of consultants and contractors and has proposed ways to improve control and value in its Final Report dated 27 July 1999. A further piece of work is under way to address Ministers' request that we examine the potential to reduce our use of external personnel by enhancing our in-house capability.

(viii) The Department is committed to the Government Procurement Card (GPC) and has developed plans to roll out GPC in order to reduce transaction costs and meet payment time obligations.

(ix) In the Department about 120 staff are engaged full-time in procurement activity, of whom 73 (61 per cent.) are qualified to at least CIPS foundation level. In addition about 30 staff are currently training towards qualification. We are on course to meet the PSA target to increase our proportion of CIPS qualified staff. A parallel target is 75 per cent. CIPS qualified staff by 2000.

(x) The Department has worked with external partners to develop a Contract Management Best Practice Model. The model will enable the Department contract management groups to assess performance against best practice and develop plans for improvement. Following a successful pilot the model has been rolled out.

Efficiency Targets

At the heart of the Department's welfare reform programme is the need to transform delivery from a passive to an active modern service promoting opportunity as well as paying benefit and exercising far better control over programme costs.

The Department will seek to achieve this by the introduction of a mixture of administrative and legislative measures

The Department will:

continue to develop better measures of efficiency and extend these to cover a wider range of Departmental initiatives;

achieve a better alignment of resources with services delivered, through more systematic use of output prices, and the wider disciplines of Resource Accounting and Budgeting;

publish service first charters and baseline performance and achieve the agreed targets;

reduce by 30 per cent. benefit losses from fraud and errors in Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance by March 2007, with at least a 10 per cent. reduction by March 2002;

deliver existing services within the running costs total implying an annual efficiency gain of at least 4 per cent. and aiming particularly to ensure tighter control of central costs and overheads; and,

invest in modernisation as the route to a more secure and efficient welfare system.

Agency Targets

To support the Departmental commitments in the PSA, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State sets annual targets for the Department's Agencies. A full list of these can be found in the Next Steps Report and in individual Agency Business Plans and Charters. Copies of these documents can be found in the Library.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will list those councils which have never prosecuted claimants for housing benefit fraud; [104616]

(2) if he will give details for the most recent year for which he has data of how many individual cases of fraud have been committed by local authority (i) members and (ii) officers; what the total value of that fraud is; how many prosecutions have so far occurred; how much of the money has been returned; and how many of the *(a)* members and *(b)* officials were dismissed from local authority employment. [104656]

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many *(a)* councillors and *(b)* council officers he estimates are involved in housing benefit fraud; [105017]

(2) what powers local authorities have to prosecute *(a)* councillors and *(b)* council officers involved in housing benefit fraud. [104989]

Angela Eagle: The Department collects information on the total number of cases referred for prosecution by local authorities and whether they have been successful. In 1997–98, 212 local authorities referred 1,148 cases for prosecution, of which 631 were successfully convicted. This information is not broken down by type. Information about those authorities who did not prosecute any cases, or did not provide information on whether they had, has been placed in the Library.

Evidence from the Audit Commission provided to the Public Accounts Committee indicated that 382 cases involving housing benefit fraud by council staff and councillors in 57 local authorities in England and Wales had occurred in 1998–99.

We are as dissatisfied as the PAC with the level of fraud and error in housing benefit—particularly where council members or officers are found to be involved. Local authorities should take a firm line and prosecute fraud wherever it occurs. This is why we set up a pilot exercise giving 174 authorities access to DSS solicitors to help prosecute wrongdoing and to establish why authorities are slow to prosecute.

Councillors and council officers should always be prosecuted where they are found to be fraudulent and it is in the public interest to do so. There also has to be sufficient evidence to prosecute. The ethical standards Bill will put in place a new framework to deliver high standards of conduct throughout local government.

Local authorities have the same powers to prosecute councillors and council officers as those used to prosecute benefit claimants who commit housing benefit fraud. Councillors and officers would normally be prosecuted under the Theft Act 1968 or the Social Security Administration Act 1992.

Reforms we have already set in train such as the Verification Framework (an intensive case checking regime), combined with rigorous identity checks and the requirement on claimants to provide National Insurance numbers will help to prevent and root out all types of fraud. New financial incentives will reward local authorities for prosecuting benefit fraudsters.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his Department's follow-up procedure for Benefit Fraud Inspectorate reports on local authorities; what follow-up assessments have been made to date; and if he will place the follow-up assessments in the Library. [104613]

Angela Eagle: Following publication of a Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report, the Department invites the local authority to consider and respond to the report and to submit any proposals for improving its performance and remedying any failings identified by the report. The report and any proposals made by the local authority in response to it are then considered to determine whether the Secretary of State should give directions to the authority as to any standards the authority is to attain and the time within which they are to be attained.

To date, 37 reports on local authorities have been published and responses by local authorities in respect of 33 of them have been, or are currently being, considered by the Department. In those cases where consideration has been completed the local authorities have been requested to provide periodic progress reports to enable us to monitor implementation of their action plans and future performance.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many local authorities have implemented the Verification Framework relating to housing benefit fraud. [104618]

Angela Eagle: At 12 January 2000, 226 local authorities have received funds to implement the Verification Framework.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what procedures he has established to assess the fraud savings from the best value project. [104614]

Angela Eagle: The central purpose of best value is to make a real and positive difference to the service people receive from their local authorities. We are setting from this April best value performance indicators for housing benefit and council tax benefit delivery, including an

interim security indicator for 2000–01. These will help drive forward continuous improvements in the standards of service authorities provide to people claiming the benefits.

We remain committed to reducing substantially the amount lost each year through fraud and error. We are continuing to press local authorities to root out fraud. For example, we have just announced new financial incentives for authorities to encourage them to undertake more prosecutions and to stop fraud getting into the system by implementing the Verification Framework.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many *(a)* administrative financial penalties and *(b)* formal cautions were issued to benefit claimants in the year for which he has the most recent data; [104660]

(2) what, in the last year for which figures are available, was the total amount collected from the 30 per cent. penalty on minor frauds when the scheme first came into operation; and what enhancements were made to the scheme between January and July 1999. [104617]

Mr. Rooker: The number of administrative penalties and cautions issued for the year 1998–99 and the year to date are as follows:

	Administration Penalties	*Cautions*
1998–99	1,637	1,239
1999 to date	2,945	3,717

These figures are constantly being updated as notification of penalties and cautions for 1998–99 and 1999 to date are still being received.

The value of Administrative Penalties imposed to date is £1,070,934. The overpayment is fully collected before the penalty, so therefore in the majority of cases the recovery of the penalty has not yet commenced, but it will.

There have been no enhancements to the scheme.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many cases of housing benefit fraud by local authority *(a)* members and *(b)* officials were detected in the City of Edinburgh in 1998–99. [104653]

Angela Eagle: The City of Edinburgh has advised that no cases of benefit fraud were detected involving council members. One case was detected involving an officer in 1998–99.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Football Taskforce

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will announce the publication of the Football Taskforce report. [104913]

Kate Hoey: The Government welcome the final report of the Football Taskforce on commercial issues which was published by the Taskforce on 22 December. Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 30 November 1999 regarding a constituent (ref. C99/24781). [104816]

Mr. Chris Smith: My hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting sent a reply on 11 January.

Sporting Talent

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to improve and encourage sporting talent in the UK. [105103]

Kate Hoey: The United Kingdom Sports Council (UK Sport) was established in January 1997 to focus on high performance sport at the UK level, with the aim of achieving sporting excellence on the world stage. The work of UK Sport, in liaison with the four Home Country Sports Councils, is to build a framework for success. Crucial to this is underpinning the base of participation and ensuring opportunities for youngsters to participate both in and out of school.

The United Kingdom Sports Institute (UKSI) will provide our best sports men and women with the facilities and services they need to help them compete successfully at the highest level. The UKSI will be made up of a central services, to be part of UK Sport, and a network of centres throughout the UK, which are being delivered by the Home Country Sports Councils. These will deliver a range of sports science and sports medicine services, including sports physiology, biomechanics, sports nutrition, physiotherapy and podiatry.

Work has also been undertaken in full consultation with Performance Directors, coaches and athletes to identify the services they need to support them in their training and competition programmes—such as, the Athlete Career and Education programme (ACE UK) and the High Performance Coaching Programme (CPD), both launched last year—to be delivered directly to our top athletes and coaches.

The development of sporting excellence, including disability sport, is also being provided through the World Class Programme. Over £80 million has already been made available from the Lottery to some 33 sports and over 2,000 athletes for World Class Performance. World Class Start and World Class Potential (to be funded from the Lottery by Sport England) will provide £25 million per annum to find, nurture and develop those with the characteristics and sporting talent to achieve success at the highest sporting level.

Sports Facilities

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what resources for *(a)* youth cricket, *(b)* Rugby League, *(c)* Rugby Union, *(d)* track and field sports and *(e)* swimming were made available for the current financial year and will be made available in the next financial year. [105104]

Kate Hoey: My Department's funding for sport is channelled primarily through the Sports Councils: Sport England and UK Sport. The resources made available by the two Sports Councils is as follows:

Sport England

	Financial year	Exchequer grant (£)	Lottery Community Project funding[1, 2] (£)
Cricket[3]	1999–2000	216,220	4,468,279
	2000–01	288,550	—
Rugby League	1999–2000	338,250	1,481,651
	2000–01	250,000	—
Rugby Union	1999–2000	251,667	5,130,915
	2000–01	335,833	—
Track and Field	1999–2000	41,666	6,482,107
	2000–01	337,000	—
Swimming	1999–2000	314,000	17,778,329
	2000–01	315,000	—

[1] It is not possible to provide details of funds that will be made available to these sports for the remainder of this or the next financial year as there is no prior allocation of Lottery Community Project funding, which is application led.

[2] 1 April 1999 to 30 November 1999.

[3] Precise details of funding for "youth cricket" are not available. However in most cases, if not all, the awards made to cricket will benefit youth in some way.

UK Sport

£

	Exchequer grants	Lottery revenue funding[1]
Athletics		
1 January 1999–31 December 1999	490,000	9,487,699
1 January 2000–31 December 2000	To be agreed	—
Swimming		
1 October 1999–30 September 2000	230,000	5,399,656
1 October 2000–30 September 2001	To be agreed	—

[1] Made available from 1 May 1998

In addition to the listed funds made available by UK Sport and Sport England, my Department also provides funding to the Sportsmatch scheme. This scheme encourages commercial sponsors to invest in grass root sport, particularly youth development programmes. During the last full financial year (1998–99) the awards made to these sports were:

	£
Cricket	231,000
Rugby League	305,000
Rugby Union	607,000
Athletics	36,000
Swimming	15,000

My Department will provide £3.373 million to Sportsmatch both this and the next financial year, of which approximately £2.9 million will be directly spent on awards. It is not possible to provide figures for each of these sports as awards to the individual sports vary from year to year and the process is application led.

Olympic Swimmers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assistance his Department provides to Olympic swimmers. [105086]

Kate Hoey: From 1 October 1999 to January 2000 the Amateur Swimming Association of Great Britain was awarded £396,029 towards the Programme costs for these swimmers which includes training at home and abroad, access to equipment and facilities, and coaching. In addition to this the swimmers themselves were awarded approximately £224,876 in subsistence support. This support will continue, the next funding period will run from 1 February 2000 to 30 September 2000, with the precise details to be agreed shortly. The final squad selection for the Sydney Olympics will be made on 30 July 2000. Currently 47 elite swimmers are supported by UK Sport and Sport England under the Lottery funded World Class Performance Programme.

Running Tracks

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many local authority running tracks there are in Lancashire. [105106]

Kate Hoey: There are 19 local authority running tracks in Lancashire.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many district authority areas in England do not have all-weather running tracks. [105105]

Kate Hoey: Of the 366 district authorities, there are 194 without all-weather running tracks.

Film Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what revenue was generated by the exports of *(a)* animated films and *(b)* all films produced in the UK in the last year for which figures are available. [105046]

Janet Anderson: Receipts from abroad to film companies in the UK totalled £581 million in 1998. This figure relates to all films and is not broken down by genre. Separate figures for animated films are not therefore available.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what is his estimate of the number of animated films to be made in the United Kingdom in 2000; [105092]

(2) how many animated films were made in the United Kingdom in each of the last five years; [105093]

(3) how many people are employed in the animated film industry. [105044]

Janet Anderson: This information is not available. However, production spend on animation in the UK is around £200 million annually, which supports some 350 independent companies. These range in size from one or two-person outfits creating small-scale experimental works, to large set ups producing multi-episode series for major broadcasters such as Channel 4, BBC and Granada. Animated product is provided across the whole spectrum of the audiovisual industries in the UK, from

commercials, television, feature films and corporate videos to the new industries dealing with websites and computer games.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what grants are available to support the production of animated films; [105090]

(2) what support his Department gives to the animated film industry. [105091]

Janet Anderson: Public funds for the support of the film industry, including film production will, from 1 April, be channelled through the Film Council. This support will comprise grant-in-aid from my Department and a dedicated percentage of National Lottery proceeds. Over the next three years the Film Council will have about £150 million at its disposal to support the film industry and film culture. It will be for the Council itself to determine the appropriate form and level of support for animation, within its overall strategy for developing a sustainable UK film industry.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of likely growth in the production of films in the UK in the next five years. [105045]

Janet Anderson: My Department does not make forecasts of film production levels. The past decade has seen considerable fluctuation in the numbers of films produced in the UK, from a low of 47 in 1992 to a high of 128 in 1996. The first five years of the decade saw a total of 317 productions with the last five years totalling 479. With the policies we have been implementing over the past three years to build on and sustain this upward trend I fully expect the current levels of film production activity to at least be maintained over the next five years.

Royal Ballet

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to encourage the Royal Ballet to make tours to all the English regions. [105043]

Mr. Alan Howarth: In 2000–01 English National Ballet will receive over £4.1 million from the Arts Council of England to tour extensively throughout England.

Their grant from the Arts Council enables the company to visit a selection of English cities every season. For example, the full company has recently toured to Oxford, Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent and London. In addition, the company divides into two and has recently toured to smaller towns and cities including Barnstaple, Barrow-in-Furness, Bexhill-on-Sea, Blackpool, Cambridge, Cheltenham, Crawley, Crewe, Poole, Richmond, Scunthorpe, Swindon, Truro, Tunbridge Wells and Woking.

Tourism

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funding his Department has made available to increase the number of tourists to the North West. [105050]

Janet Anderson: The North West region currently receives an allocation of funds for tourism from the English Tourism Council. More funds will be made available from the next financial year for the support of tourism in the regions and more work will be undertaken at regional levels to deliver the actions in Tomorrow's Tourism. The overall North West Region, as all other regions, will also benefit from other funds such as lottery funding, the Single Regeneration Budget and European Regional Development Budget.

Sports Equipment

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will make grants available to Rugby League clubs for renewing and replacing equipment; [105089]

(2) if he will make grants available to cricket clubs for renewing and replacing cricket equipment. [105088]

Kate Hoey: Under the Millennium Festival Awards for All scheme, grants are already available to, among other things, provide opportunities for all clubs, including cricket and rugby league, to purchase new equipment. This scheme was introduced specifically to ensure that the widest possible range of projects benefit from the National Lottery.

Sport (Centres of Excellence)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will establish a centre of excellence for Rugby League and Rugby Union in the North West. [105101]

Kate Hoey: Sport England is currently in discussions with the governing bodies of Rugby League and Rugby Union about their requirements for developing performance to the highest level. Whatever is developed will be linked in to the services and facilities provided by the United Kingdom Sports Institute.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the centres of excellence for sport in England. [105107]

Kate Hoey: The United Kingdom Sports Institute in England will have 10 National Network Centres. These will be at Bath University, Bedford, Bisham Abbey, Crystal Palace, Gateshead, Holme Pierrepont/Loughborough, Lilleshall, Manchester, Southampton University, and Sheffield. Each will be supported by regional sites of expertise, ensuring best practice is harnessed for the benefit of athletes and coaches through a consortium approach. In October 1999, Sports England confirmed up to £120 million of Lottery funds towards project costs of £175 million to support the English element of the United Kingdom Sports Institute.

Cricket

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what support his Department provides to local cricket clubs to encourage wider participation in the game. [105087]

Kate Hoey: Exchequer funding for cricket, via Sport England, is supporting development officers who are working to increase participation in the game, focusing particularly on junior players. Cricket is also benefiting from BT Top Sport delivered by the Youth Sports Trust and Sport England which is aimed at encouraging young

people to participate in sport. In addition, local cricket clubs can apply for funding under the Millennium Festival Awards for All scheme whereby applicants must demonstrate, among other things, that they intend to use the funding to encourage wider participation at a local level.

Theatres (Rural Areas)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to extend access to theatres for people living in rural areas. [105042]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Arts Council of England aims to increase access to theatres for people living in rural areas by continuing to fund the touring activities of our arts organisations. Significantly, the Arts Council will be announcing later this year details of the National Touring Programme, a new Lottery scheme. This Programme, which has initially been allocated £10 million over two years, will fund new and existing touring by supporting the distribution of work from across a broad range of arts disciplines and scales to audiences throughout England.

In addition, the New Audiences Fund is supporting over 100 projects with an annual budget of £5 million. The projects supported include those which aim to deliver more arts events and activities to more people throughout the country, primarily by extending existing 'tours' to increase their geographical reach and by exploring new methods and means of distribution. A selection of projects will also promote broader access by addressing practical barriers to attendance in rural areas, including transport.

Royal Parks

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the permissions granted, giving dates and organisations involved, for demonstrations to take place in each of the Royal Parks since 1 May 1997. [104650]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* Responsibility for the subject of this question has been delegated to the Royal Parks Agency under its Chief Executive, David Welch. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from David Welch to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 17 January 2000:

I have been asked by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the number of demonstrations for which permission has been granted and the organisations involved, because it is a matter for which responsibility has been passed to this Agency.

I attach a list of all assemblies, rallies and demonstrations for which permission has been granted in Hyde Park. Hyde Park is the only park where we permit these activities to take place.

List of assemblies, demonstrations, rallies in Hyde Park

Date	*Assembly/demonstration/rally*	*Organisation*
17 May 1997	A'shura day of mourning	Islamic Universal Association
17 May 1997	Sportsman's Association rally	
24 May 1997	Iranians in exile	
6 June 1997	Krishna Consciousness	
7 June 1997	Europeans march against unemployment	
8 June 1997	International Sikh Youth Foundation	Federation of UK Sikhs
21 June 1997	Iraqi opposition groups in London	
22 June 1997	Eritrean rally (Consulate of Eritrea)	
5 July 1997	Gay Pride Assembly	Gay Pride
10 July 1997	Countryside Rally	Countryside Alliance
12 July 1997	Megan's Law Assembly	
13 July 1997	Young Indian Vegetarian rally	
19 July 1997	Eid-Ul-Millad-Un-Nabbi Birthday	
20 July 1997	Federation of Cypriots Rally	Federation of Cypriots
26 July 1997	United Tamils Organisation	
2 August 1997	National Anti-Hunt Campaign	
3 August 1997	The voice of world Muslims	
17 August 1997	Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Committee Assembly	
6 September 1997	Campaign for the rights of survivors of sexual abuse	
28 September 1997	Sportsman's Association	
18 October 1997	Cuba Solidarity Campaign	
25 October 1997	Kashmir Co-ordination Committee	
1 November 1997	Anti Tuition Fee Assembly	
28 November 1997	Campaign for Free Education	
24 January 1998	Islamic Human Rights Commission	
1 February 1998	United Tamils Organisation	
28 February 1998	Let's Rescue Ethiopia Assembly	
1 March 1998	Countryside Alliance March	
28 March 1998	Cannabis March	Independent on Sunday
25 March 1998	Iraqi Muslim Community Assembly	
7 May 1998	A'shura day of mourning	Islamic Universal Association
17 May 1998	Sinhala Bala Mandalaya Anti Tamil Tigers March	
6 June 1998	Krishna Awareness	
7 June 1998	Federation of Sikh Organisations Assembly	Federation of Sikh Organisations UK
4 July 1998	Gay Pride Assembly (Gay Pride)	
26 September 1998	National Association for People Abused in Childhood	NAPAC
4 October 1998	Kosova Solidarity March	
31 October 1998	Movement Against the Monarchy	
18 October 1998	Campaign for Free Education	
1 November 1998	Ethiopians for Peace and Development Association	
16 January 1999	United Islamic Students Association	
31 January 1999	United Tamils Organisation	
20 February 1999	Cricklewood Against Nuclear Trains	
21 February 1999	British Eritrean Association Assembly	BEA
10 April 1999	Campaign Against Genetically Modified Food	
17 April 1999	Campaign Against Sanctions and War on Iraq	
25 April 1999	Albania Community Rally	
27 April 1999	A'shuru day of mourning	Islamic Universal Association
13 June 1999	Federation of Sikh Organisations Assembly	
20 June 1999	Freedom of Choice Rally	
20 June 1999	Eritrean Rally	Consulate of Eritrea

List of assemblies, demonstrations, rallies in Hyde Park

Date	*Assembly/demonstration/rally*	*Organisation*
3 July 1999	Gay Pride Assembly	Gay Pride
10 July 1999	Justice for Livia Assembly	
12 July 1999	Holy Grave Destruction Protest	
17 July 1999	Kent Against Live Exports Assembly	
15 August 1999	Krishna Awareness	
9 September 1999	Iraqi Cancer Epidemic Rally	Mariam Appeal
3 October 1999	Assembly of the Camden Trust	Camden Trust
31 October 1999	Keep Barnet Alive	
31 December 1999	Young Indian Vegetarian Rally	

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he plans to respond to the review of concessionary television licences carried out by the Davies Panel. [104604]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* I intend to announce the Government's conclusions on all the Davies panel's recommendations shortly.

Nautical Archaeology

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he is taking following the letters to him of 15 December 1999 from Valerie Fenwick, and of 17 December from Angela Groome, to update the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973 and to provide resources for nautical archaeology. [104511]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* It is Government policy, as announced following our Departmental Spending Review, to grant English Heritage powers in respect of underwater archaeology. This will allow access to English Heritage grant funds currently unavailable to underwater archaeology projects. Expansion of English Heritage's remit in this way will require legislative changes, and we will continue to seek an early legislative opportunity for this purpose.

It will be a matter for English Heritage, once they have been given responsibility for underwater archaeology, to advise on whether the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973 needs updating.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received from UK Athletics concerning the proposals for the English National Stadium at Wembley put forward by Wembley Stadium Ltd. regarding the proposals' suitability for hosting the World Athletics Championships and an Olympic athletics competition. [104334]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* My Department was in close contact with UK Athletics about the proposals for athletics at Wembley. Following the announcement made by my right hon. Friend to the House on 1 December 1999, *Official Report,* columns 305–06, and a further statement issued on 22 December 1999, my Department are continuing to work with UK Athletics and the British Olympic Association to develop and assess non-Wembley options for staging international athletics events.

Athletics

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the suitability of the Copland School site or a location for a warm-up track for the World Athletics Championships in 2005. [104325]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* The suitability of a number of options for warm up facilities around the stadium at Wembley were considered by Sport England including the Copeland School site. Although providing a lasting legacy for school and community use, Sport England expressed reservations in respect of access to the stadium during an event which would have weakened a World Athletics Championship bid.

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions he has had with the Chief Executive of UK Athletics about the feasibility of hosting the World Athletics Championships and an Olympic athletics competition at Twickenham; [104340]

(2) if all seats in the stadium at Twickenham would comply with the C60 minimum sightlines specification of the Green Guide and the Football Stadium Advisory Design Council for a world athletics championship staged there without relocating the site of the present stands; [104329]

(3) what assessment his Department has made of the cost of upgrading the public transport infrastructure at Twickenham so as to make it capable of hosting a world athletics championship and an Olympic athletics competition; [104333]

(4) when designs for the conversion of Twickenham, such as would render it suitable to accommodate a World Athletics Championship and an Olympic athletics competition, will be ready for submission to the local planning authority; [104341]

(5) what assessment he has made of the cost of demolishing and rebuilding the South Stand at Twickenham on a *(a)* hydraulic and *(b)* roller system so as to accommodate an athletics track suitable for hosting a world athletics championship and Olympic athletics competition and of providing additional infill seating between the new south stand and the existing east and west stands, inclusive of lost revenue whilst such alterations are being carried out; [104342]

(6) what assessment he has made of the cost of upgrading seating and corporate hospitality at Twickenham to render it suitable to host a World Athletics Championship and Olympic athletic competition; [104337]

(7) what assessment he has made as to whether the timescale for converting Twickenham into a stadium capable of hosting the World Athletics Championship and an Olympic athletics competition will allow a successful bid for the 2005 World Athletics Championships; [104339]

(8) what assessment he has made of the need to upgrade the corporate hospitality facilities at Twickenham as part of a bid to host the 2005 World Athletics Championships and an Olympic athletic competition; [104336]

(9) what investigations he has made into locating a suitable warm-up track for the 2005 World Athletics championships close to Twickenham. [104324]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 January 2000]*: Sport England, together with UK Sport, UK Athletics, the BOA and the Department, is undertaking further work on non-Wembley options for staging international athletics events. The Rugby Football Union (RFU) proposed that Twickenham might be used for such events and constructive discussions are underway between the Department, Sport England, UK Athletics, the BOA, the RFU and the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. A further announcement will be made once this work is completed.

Departmental Employee Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104018]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport was established in April 1992 following machinery of government changes.

The information for 1 April 1999 is as follows:

	Men	*Women*
16–19	1	0
20–24	5	1
25–29	18	21
30–34	41	40
35–39	46	35
40–44	31	19
45–49	35	15
50+	24	28

Digital Television

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has received regarding the number of transmitters and the power of transmissions for digital television services; and if he will make a statement. [104725]

Janet Anderson: DCMS has received a number of representations from MPs and members of the public about the coverage of digital terrestrial television (DTT) services.

The BBC and Independent Television Commission (ITC) jointly planned for the launch of digital terrestrial television and developed a plan comprising a network of 81 transmitter sites across the UK, most of which are now broadcasting.

The BBC and ITC, with the transmission providers, are now considering, in consultation with the digital broadcasters, Government and representatives of manufacturers and consumers, how to improve coverage across all six digital terrestrial television multiplexes at all of the 81 sites. It is hoped, as a result of initial work in the London and surrounding area, that significant improvements will be possible.

Television News Coverage

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will instruct the ITC to obtain from ITV the latest figures showing *(a)* the change in the numbers watching news on Channel 3 since the abolition of "News at Ten" and *(b)* the change in the viewing numbers for the 10.00 to 10.30 p.m. weekday slot on Channel 3 since the abolition of "News at Ten". [104467]

Janet Anderson: The Independent Television Commission is monitoring the performance of ITV following changes to its news provision in March 1999. For the four weeks beginning 6 December 1999 the average audiences who were watching news on Channel 3 and the figures for the equivalent weeks in 1998 are as follows:

(a)

	Million
1998	
5.40–6.00	5.6
10.00–10.30	6.5
Total	12.1
1999	
6.30–7.00	6.2
11.00–11.15	3.2
Total	9.5

(b) The average Channel 3 audience between 10.00 and 10.30 p.m. was 0.9 million less in the four weeks beginning 6 December 1999 than it was in the equivalent weeks in 1998.

TREASURY

Smuggling

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library a copy of Martin Taylor's report on the Government's Strategy to Combat Tobacco Smuggling. [105332]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Martin Taylor's advice to the Chancellor was personal and confidential, including areas of operational sensitivity to HM Customs and Excise. It would therefore not be appropriate to place Mr. Taylor's advice in the Library.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the amount of UK duty lost through the smuggling of alcohol in each of the last three years. [105358]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) on 26 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 254–55W, and to the technical report on cross-Channel smuggling placed in the Library of the House on 19 September 1998.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 25 November regarding a constituent. [104815]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have responded.

Cigarette Exports (Labelling)

Mr. Barron: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he has asked or intends to ask representatives of the UK tobacco manufacturers, distributors or exporters to provide data on quantities of UK manufactured cigarettes that have been exported from the UK with UK health warnings and markings and to explain the purpose of exporting cigarettes so labelled. [104642]

Dawn Primarolo: Such matters are laid to HM Customs and Excise. Customs does not routinely require tobacco manufacturers or other exporters to provide data on cigarettes exported with UK health warnings and markings. Customs is considering whether there is a case for doing so in future.

Mr. Barron: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates HM Customs and Excise has made of the quantity of UK-manufactured cigarettes *(a)* exported from the UK with UK health warnings and markings and *(b)* sold on cross-channel ferries since July 1999 with UK health warnings and markings but with duty paid in France or Belgium. [104641]

Dawn Primarolo: HM Customs and Excise have no estimates for the extent of these activities.

Energy Saving (VAT)

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the VAT rates levied on a private citizen on *(a)* 1 January 1999 and *(b)* 1 January 2000 installing energy saving measures using a contractor in (i) France, (ii) Italy and (iii) the UK. [104690]

Dawn Primarolo: The VAT rates for the installation of energy saving measures by a private citizen on 1 January 1999 and 1 January 2000 are:

(i) For installation in France

On 1 January 1999 the VAT rate for the installation of energy saving materials was 22.5 per cent. France brought in a reduced rate of 5.5 per cent. for renovation and repair to private dwellings over two years old as part of their Autumn Budget in September 1999. The installation of energy saving materials is included within the scope of this reduced rate.

(ii) For installation in Italy

On 1 January 1999 the VAT rate for the installation of energy saving materials was 20 per cent. Italy has applied to the European Commission to apply a reduced rate of 10 per cent. to the renovation, routine maintenance and repair of private dwellings from 1 January 2000. It is not clear whether Italy intend to include the installation of energy saving materials in their reduced rate.

(iii) For installation in the UK

In July 1998 this Government introduced a reduced VAT rate of 5 per cent. for the grant-funded installation of energy saving materials in the homes of the less well off. All other installations of energy saving materials attracted VAT at the standard rate of 17.5 per cent. on 1 January 1999 and continue to do so.

Staff Bonuses

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies spent in total on extra bonuses above usual payments for staff working over the New Year period; what were the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum bonuses paid; how many people received the (i) maximum and (ii) minimum payments; and if he will make a statement. [104478]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is too early to determine accurately what special additional payments will be made to staff for the new year period.

Asset Sales

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the value of asset disposals, at 1997–98 prices, for each year from 1992–93 to 2001–02 for *(a)* central Government, *(b)* local authorities and *(c)* other public bodies. [104477]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Receipts from the sale of fixed assets for central Government, local authorities and public corporations for 1993–94 to 2001–02 in 1997–98 prices are as shown.

1997–98 prices £ million

	Central government	*Local authorities*	*Public corporations*
1993–94	640	3,987	1,165
1994–95	704	3,086	1,048
1995–96	844	2,579	993
1996–97	1,861	2,607	1,045
1997–98	1,568	2,483	950
1998–99[1]	1,557	2,151	763
1999–2000[2]	947	2,604	552
2000–01[2]	924	2,541	614
2001–02[2]	901	2,479	560

[1] Estimated outturn
[2] Plan

It should be noted that plans not outturn figures are shown for the current and future years. 1992–93 data cannot be provided on a consistent series.

Advance Corporation Tax

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the overall cost of the changes in advance corporation tax in his 1997 Budget to public sector-funded pension schemes, broken down between the different schemes. [104624]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The information is not available and could be gathered only at disproportionate cost. Over time the abolition of dividend tax credits should be of benefit to anyone investing in business—including pension funds—because it removes an artificial tax bias to pay dividends instead of retaining and reinvesting profits.

Orphan Asset Surplus Funds

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what decisions he has made since 1998 in respect of requests from financial services companies for the disposal of orphan asset surplus funds; and if he will make a statement. [105073]

Miss Melanie Johnson: None.

Dividend Tax Credits

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many applications have been *(a)* received and *(b)* refused for the repayment of dividend tax credits since 5 April 1999. [104890]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Inland Revenue does not record this information.

Appropriation Orders

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 448W, concerning transfers of appropriations, if he will list the titles and purposes of all such orders made in the 1999 financial year. [105132]

Miss Melanie Johnson: A list of all transfers of appropriations made during each quarter of 1999 is attached to the unsigned Explanatory Memorandum submitted following the end of each quarter. The First and Second Quarterly Reports were submitted on 11 November 1999. The Third Quarterly Report will be submitted shortly, and the Fourth Quarterly Report will be prepared as soon as all the relevant documents have been received from the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament.

Council of Ministers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which Ministers will attend meetings of the Council of Ministers of the European Union concerned with financial and economic affairs during the current presidency; and if he will list the relevant dates and the topics expected to be discussed. [104992]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor of the Exchequer will be attending the meetings of ECOFIN scheduled for 31 January, 28 February, 13 March, 7–8 April, 2 May and 5 June. The agendas for the meetings are not yet known.

Interest Rates

Mr. White: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proposals he has to review the link between the Treasury standard interest rate and mortgage rates. [104841]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury sets a number of interest rates. Most rates are set in relation to National Loans Fund rates, which in turn are set by the Treasury marginally above the rate at which the Government can borrow in the gilts market.

The Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee sets official interest rates in order to meet the Government's inflation target. Changes in official rates affect market interest rates, including mortgage rates. Mortgage rates are set by the lenders concerned taking into account market conditions and other factors. The Government has no plans to set Treasury rates by reference to mortgage rates.

EU Fraud

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the cost to the United Kingdom as a result of fraud within the European Union in each of the last three years. [104257]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The European Commission produces a report each year entitled "Protecting the Community's financial interests and the Fight against Fraud", which includes figures for detected fraud and irregularities against the EC budget. The latest report, for 1998, was published on the Commission's public internet website on 19 November 1999 and previous reports are available in the House of Commons Library. However, it is important to note that the majority of the cases are not deliberate frauds but irregularities which may be the result of genuine errors, for instance payment made outside prescribed time limits.

Classification between fraud and irregularity is difficult because cases where there is a suspicion of fraud will be subject to lengthy investigations and legal proceedings. The Commission estimates in its report on the 1998 figures that, on a preliminary analysis, there was a suspicion of fraud in about 20 per cent. of the cases detected.

Stress Counselling

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the tax liability of the provision by employers of stress counselling for employees. [105333]

Dawn Primarolo: Medical or health benefits, including stress or other welfare counselling, provided by employers for employees are, like other benefits, usually taxable on employees—except where the counselling relates directly to something which has happened in carrying out the duties of the employment. But the benefit per employee of a generally available counselling service can be very small and tax may not in practice be charged.

However, as I announced to the House on 19 November 1999, in response to a written question from my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence), *Official Report*, column 13W, we will be bringing forward legislation in the next Finance Bill to provide an exemption for the benefit of an employer-provided welfare counselling service generally available to employees.

VAT (Housing)

Mr. Curry: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the impact on tax revenue in a full year of levying a 5 per cent. rate of VAT both on house refurbishment and repair and on construction on previously undeveloped land. [105145]

Dawn Primarolo: The full year cost in 2000–01 of levying a 5 per cent. rate of VAT on both house refurbishment and repair and on construction on previously undeveloped land would be approximately £670 million, assuming no consequential change in pre-tax prices.

Consultation

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what bodies his Department has consulted on each of its programmes since May 1997. [105243]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Chancellor's departments consult widely on proposals across the diverse range of policies for which they are responsible. There is no central record of consultees, and one could be assembled only at disproportionate expense.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 18 January 2000

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Aircraft Incidents (Heathrow)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the incidents involving objects falling from aircraft landing or taking off from Heathrow in the last five years. [104633]

Mr. Mullin: In the last five years, the Civil Aviation Authority has received 62 reports of objects landing in the London area, which are presumed to have fallen from aircraft using Heathrow airport. Forty of these reports involved ice, 21 involved aircraft parts or related objects such as tools and one involved the body of a stowaway.

Airport Traffic

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list in order of the number of their air traffic movements for the last five years all airports where cover is provided other than by National Air Traffic Services, stating the numbers of passengers using those airports in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99. [104627]

Mr. Mullin: The following list details passenger traffic for 1996–98 (1999 not yet available), through the major UK airports which do not have air traffic control provided by National Air Traffic Services. The airports are listed in order of their air traffic movements over the last five years, which include both commercial and non-commercial movements.

Air traffic and passenger data for UK airports which do not have air traffic control provided by National Air Traffic Services

	Passenger traffic (thousand)		
UK airports without NATS ATC provision [1]	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Bournemouth	162	265	313
Biggin Hill	6	7	7
Liverpool	620	682	869
Jersey	1,645	1,687	1,694
Gloucestershire	2	2	2
Newcastle	2,433	2,592	2,920
Shoreham	3	3	2
East Midlands	1,822	1,878	2,136
Prestwick	522	567	558
Cambridge	29	20	17
Teeside	444	557	651
Guernsey	846	871	890
Luton	2,411	3,221	4,116
Coventry	3	2	3
Bristol	1,394	1,586	1,814
Southend	551	618	725
Leeds/Bradford	1,053	1,247	1,398
Southampton	551	618	725
Norwich	258	264	318
Blackpool	85	83	94
Exeter	205	213	241
Belfast City	1,361	1,282	1,314
Dundee	13	16	9
Isle of Man	605	677	701
Humberside	279	332	344
Plymouth	98	103	110
Carlisle	1	1	1
Lydd	–	3	2
Inverness	285	379	324
Sumburgh	401	345	287
Kent International	2	3	2
Alderney	84	81	77
Isles of Scilly—St Mary's	125	128	132
Londonderry	64	56	49
Kirkwall	92	89	83
Stornaway	94	96	96
Penzance Heliport	106	109	120
Wick	28	25	23
Scatsta	79	102	104
Sheffield City	–	–	47

[1] Listed in decreasing order of air traffic movements

Notes:

1. Air Traffic Movements include both commercial and non-commercial movements

2. Passenger traffic figures are collated in calender years. The 1999 figures are not yet available.

3. Sheffield City began reporting passenger figures in June 1997.

National Air Traffic Services

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 539W, on National Air Traffic Services, when he expects to be able to offer a detailed list of all property *(a)* leased and *(b)* owned by NATS, with a valuation and a list of sites. [104668]

Mr. Mullin: A list of properties which are leased or owned by National Air Traffic Services (NATS) is being put together as part of the due diligence exercise for the NATS public–private partnership. A valuation will be produced for the key sites which are owned by NATS. This work is currently scheduled for completion in late Spring 2000.

Underground Storage Tanks

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals are being considered to oblige owners of sub-standard underground storage tanks to replace them, line them or retrofit cathodic protection. [104635]

Mr. Meacher: Existing health and safety legislation requires all employers to assess the risks from their work activities. Where the result of the assessment indicates that storage tanks may be sub-standard, the employer should select the most suitable remedial measure to reduce the risk of a leak. Suitable measures for underground petrol storage tanks include replacement, taking the tank out of use, lining the tank, or fitting cathodic protection.

Petroleum Licensing Officers may specifically require the above matters as part of a petrol licence if they consider this is appropriate.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to require underground storage tank owners to measure the risk of corrosion failure. [104637]

Mr. Meacher: Employers are required to assess the risks to people's heath and safety in the event of a leak from an underground storage tank, and the likelihood of a tank corroding is one of the factors that should be taken into account in the assessment.

The Health and Safety Executive has issued guidance on the need to provide corrosion protection where appropriate and it is included in recently published industry guidance as one of the methods to manage the risk of a leak. Measuring the actual degree of corrosion is technically difficult and can be hazardous to the workers involved. For these reasons HSE would advocate leak protection and detection methods.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received on the reliability of tightness testing with regard to underground storage tanks. [104639]

Mr. Meacher: Tightness testing is one of a number of options available to employers to check the integrity of a new underground storage tank or to confirm a suspected leak in an existing tank. No recent representations have been received on the reliability of tightness testing.

Petroleum Licensing

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received on the replacement of petroleum licensing by a safety regime for petrol stations. [104636]

Mr. Meacher: No recent representations have been received on replacement of petroleum licensing.

The existing petrol licensing scheme, provided for under the Petroleum (Consolidation) Act 1928, is currently being reviewed by the Health and Safety Commission as part of a project to implement the EU Chemical Agents Directive. Particular consideration is being given to safety controls at petrol stations and the continuing need for a permissioning regime. Discussions to date have included the Petrol Retailers' Association, the United Kingdom Petroleum Industry Association, the Association of United Kingdom Oil Independents and the TUC. The Health and Safety Commission plans to consult on proposals for new legislation to implement the Directive in the autumn.

Environment Agency

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information was conveyed by the Minister for the Environment at the board meeting of the Environment Agency, held on 15 December 1999; and what matters raised at the meeting have been acted upon by his Department. [104700]

Mr. Meacher: I attended part of the December Board meeting. I participated in discussions on the Chief Executive's update on key issues. A summary of the meeting, including my comments, is on the Agency's web site, www.environment-agency.gov.uk. There was no direct action for my Department resulting from my attendance.

Biggin Hill

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the powers of *(a)* his Department and *(b)* other statutory bodies in respect of applications to provide scheduled and charter aircraft services at Biggin Hill Airfield, Kent. [104851]

Mr. Mullin: Biggin Hill Airport Ltd. presented a development strategy for Biggin Hill airfield to Bromley Borough Council in November 1999. No planning application has been received by the Council.

Depending on the circumstances and size of a proposed development, some or all of the following may be required in order to provide aircraft services: planning permission following the completion of an environmental impact assessment, the granting of a Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) operators safety licence, and permission by the CAA to levy airport charges.

In most cases planning permission for proposed developments would be decided by the relevant local planning authority. However, the Secretary of State has the reserve power to call in a planning application if issues of more than local importance are involved.

French Hauliers

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the obligations of the French Government under EU law in relation to free trade within France and the action it has taken to fulfil these obligations in respect of the dispute by French hauliers. [105007]

Mr. Hill: Council Regulation (EC) 2679/98 requires member states to take all necessary and proportionate measures in order to facilitate the free movement of goods on their territories. Such measures must not, however, affect the exercise of fundamental rights, including the right or freedom to strike. The blockades, which were set up in France on 10 January, were removed on 12 January.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has made to the *(a)* French Government and *(b)* European Commission, regarding the dispute by French hauliers; and if he will make a statement. [105006]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport wrote to the French Transport Minister on Tuesday 11 January to express our concern that yet again British hauliers were being prevented from going about their lawful business by a domestic dispute in France. My right hon. and noble Friend also sought assurances that the French Government would ensure the safety and well being of any British lorry drivers caught up in the dispute, and would act quickly to restore the free movement of goods. The letter was copied to the European Commission.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates the Government have received of the cost to British companies of the French hauliers' dispute; and if he will make a statement. [105012]

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the cost to British business of the latest road blockade in France. [105265]

Mr. Hill: Regrettably, a number of companies and individuals will have incurred financial loss and suffered delay and general inconvenience as a result of the dispute in France. The Government have received no estimates of these overall costs and have no means of assessing what they might be.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has discussed with the French Government the issue of compensation for British lorry drivers whose livelihoods are affected by the French hauliers' dispute. [105008]

Mr. Hill: It is a cause for concern that, yet again, British hauliers have suffered financially as a result of a domestic dispute in France. However, as the French Government gave notice of this dispute on Friday 7 January, any hauliers who subsequently chose to travel to France and were then blockaded there are unlikely to be eligible for compensation under the relevant French law. Similarly, vehicles that were delayed outside French territory would not be eligible for compensation under French legislation.

Lorry Netting

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what recent representations he has received regarding the use of netting to secure scrap metal carried in open-top lorries; [105141]

(2) what recent guidance he has issued to road haulage companies regarding the securing of scrap metal carried in lorries. [105142]

Mr. Hill: There have been no representations regarding the use of netting to secure scrap metal carried in open top lorries.

Sections 1 and 2 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 and the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 require any load carried by a vehicle to be secured at all times and if necessary by physical restraints. To support this my Department issues a Code of Practice on the Safety of Loads on Goods Vehicles, which advises on the best practices for securing loads. This Code is widely used throughout the road haulage industry.

Waste Disposal (London)

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of waste from London boroughs in 1998 was disposed of outside the area of the former Greater London Council. [105326]

Mr. Mullin: It is for each individual Waste Disposal Authority in London to make its own arrangements for the disposal of municipal waste arising in its area. My Department does not seek or keep information on where that waste is disposed.

Capital Receipts (Stoke)

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources have been made available to Stoke-on-Trent City Council under the housing capital receipts policy in each year since its inception, including amounts agreed for 2000–01. [105156]

Mr. Mullin: The allocations made to Stoke-on-Trent City Council under the Capital Receipts Initiative (CRI) were as follows:

	£
1997–98	907,000
1998–99	3,141,000
1999–2000	2,894,000

There is no separate CRI allocation for 2000–01 as the resources for the CRI, and for support for private sector renovation grants, have been included within the main housing allocation. This has been done to provide authorities with more flexibility over the use of capital resources and to reduce the administrative burdens of operating the three separate funding streams.

Stoke-on-Trent's main housing allocation for 2000–01 is £11.7 million, 49 per cent. more than its equivalent allocation (including CRI and private sector renovation) for 1999–2000 (£7.8 million).

Ambleside Bypass

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for the proposed Ambleside bypass. [105224]

Mr. Hill: The Government have no plans for an Ambleside bypass.

Driving Agencies

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 13 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 213W, on driving agencies, when the Audit Commission report on the DVLA and the DSA will be published. [105644]

Mr. Hill: I now understand that the Public Services Productivity Panel intend to publish this report on 27 January.

Conservation Funding

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans to provide enhanced funding for the management and conservation of areas of outstanding natural beauty. [105291]

Mr. Mullin: Funding for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) has already been increased this year by allocating an additional £2.5 million to the Countryside Agency to be spent on the management and conservation of designated AONBs. This is more than double the amount previously available. This increased funding will be carried through into the next year, to be supplemented by a further £1 million, bringing the countryside Agency's budget for AONBs in 2000–01 to £5.7 million.

My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment expects to make an announcement soon on other measures to strengthen the protection and management of designated AONBs.

Road Congestion

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the cost to the economy of road congestion in each of the last 10 years. [105696]

Mr. Hill: No complete and consistent set of estimates has, to my knowledge, been compiled. A number of estimates have been made of the value road users place on the extra journey times caused by congestion, for different years and using different methods. They agree that this runs to billions of pounds every year, and has been rising. These estimates do not, though, take into account the very considerable costs of providing congestion-free conditions. We will be examining the economic implications as part of the follow-up to our report, "Tackling Congestion and Pollution", published today.

Housing

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the total amount of money that local authorities were allowed to spend on *(a)* housing repairs and *(b)* new build for each of the past 10 years. [105230]

Mr. Mullin: The size and composition of local authorities' housing capital programmes is for them to decide in the light of the resources available (from their own resources and in allocations from central Government) and their assessment of expenditure priorities. Registered social landlords (RSLs) are now the main providers of new social housing as they can, through the use of private finance, deliver higher levels of outputs. RSL new build is supported through the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme (ADP) as well as by grants from local authorities. Details of central Government allocations to support English local authorities housing capital programmes, a substantial proportion of which goes on renovation of council housing, and the ADP over the past 10 years (in £ million) are as set out.

	Local authority housing capital [1]	*ADP* [2]
1991–92	1,682	1,732
1992–93	1,593	2,369
1993–94	1,434	1,843
1994–95	1,220	1,530
1995–96	1,147	1,183
1996–97	1,059	1,068
1997–98	925	702
1998–99	1,210	621
1999–2000	1,252	643
2000–01	1,891	674

[1] Excludes allocations for area based regeneration work delivered through the Single Regeneration Budget and Estate Action and the allowance for expenditure assumed to be financed from receipts included in the allocations for individual authorities.
[2] Gross expenditure, including support for rough sleepers and City Challenge.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authority/private partnerships there are in the rented sector, other than housing association partnerships; and what assessment he has made of their effectiveness. [105226]

Mr. Mullin: Information is not available on how many local authority/private partnerships there are for the provision of housing services in the rented sector. However, eight local authorities in England are piloting arrangements with the private sector for the refurbishment and management of housing stock via the Private Finance Initiative. We will be monitoring the effectiveness of these arrangements as they progress.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the total number of houses in multiple occupation in use in each of the past 10 years. [105229]

Mr. Mullin: There are a number of different types of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). The main information on the numbers of HMOs for England are the English House Condition Survey (which is carried out every five years, the last two surveys being conducted in 1991 and 1996) and the Census (1991). There are no reliable sources of information for the intervening years.

The table provides best estimates for different types of HMOs. This shows a small decline in the number of HMOs from 1991 to 1996. For traditional and purpose built HMOs and converted flats, the building contains more than one accommodation unit and can therefore be fully or partially occupied. This is reflected in the difference between the number of accommodation units provided and the number of households in occupation for these categories of HMO.

Buildings, units of accommodation and households in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) in England (all tenures) by given type of HMO, 1991 and 1996

Thousand

	1991			*1996*		
	Buildings	*Accommodation units*	*Households*	*Buildings*	*Accommodation units*	*Households*
Traditional HMOs (bedsits)	75	337	313	64	251	195
Shared houses and flats	220	220	220	201	201	201
Households with lodgers	213	213	213	203	203	203
Purpose built HMOs	2	51	50	4	49	35
Converted flats	250	1,028	956	232	812	754
Total	760	1,849	1,752	704	1,516	1,388

Notes:
1. Figures exclude hostels, guest houses, boarding houses and bed and breakfast accommodation. Information for this type of HMO is available only from the 1991 Census which reported 45,000 buildings providing 274,000 units of accommodation under this category.
2. There are slight variations between the statistics quoted above and the figures published in the 1996 English House Condition Survey report. This is because of minor modifications made to improve the EHCS database since publication. The modifications do not affect any of the patterns, findings or conclusions contained in the report.
3. There is a margin of error involved in the estimates arising from the sample nature of the English House Condition Survey and from the complexities of classifying some types of HMO from information obtained through the Census.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the total number of council houses available for rent in each of the past 10 years. [105227]

Mr. Mullin: The number of local authority-owned properties which were tenanted, or available for letting, in England since 1990 is as follows:

Year	*Dwellings (million)*
1990	3.990
1991	3.859
1992	3.810
1993	3.729
1994	3.637
1995	3.534
1996	3.438
1997	3.369
1998	3.277
1999	3.142

Source:
DETR Annual Housing Investment Programme returns

Bus Services

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the level of funding for rural bus subsidies in each of the last 10 years. [105698]

Mr. Hill: No funding was specifically provided for the subsidy of rural bus services during the period 1989–90 to 1997–98, apart from £4 million in 1989–90 and £1 million in 1990–91 of residual spending on the transitional rural bus grant scheme under the Transport Act 1985.

New funding for the support of rural buses was introduced by this Government in 1998–99. In that year my Department paid a total of £25.7 million to English local authorities under the Rural Bus Subsidy Grant and Rural Bus Challenge schemes. I understand that allocations by the Welsh Office in 1998–99 to Welsh local authorities under the Bus Partnership Fund totalled £2.25 million.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many bus passenger journeys there were in each of the last 10 years. [105697]

Mr. Hill: The figures up to 1998–99 are taken from table 2 of the Transport Statistics Bulletin, "A Bulletin of Public Transport Statistics: Great Britain 1999". Local bus passenger journeys made in Great Britain over the last decade are as summarised.

Local bus services: passenger journeys

	Millions
1989–90	5,068
1990–91	4,844
1991–92	4,660
1992–93	4,475
1993–94	4,380
1994–95	4,415
1995–96	4,378
1996–97	4,345
1997–98	4,325
1998–99	4,243

Protection of Conservation Areas

Mr. Singh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he intends to take to ensure sites submitted to the European Commission as candidate special areas of conservation under the Habitats Directive are given appropriate protection during delays in the adoption of such sites. [105976]

Mr. Meacher: I intend to bring forward Regulations which will extend the provisions of the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 to candidate Special Areas of Conservation in England as soon as practicable. I am proposing to give these sites the same level of protection as would be available on sites which become Sites of Community Interest or is already available to sites classified as Special Protection Areas under the Birds Directive. This enhanced protection will ensure that the integrity of sites we have proposed as

candidate Special Areas of Conservation is not adversely affected by, for example, damaging operations prior to their adoption by Europe.

Policy for such matters falls within the responsibilities of the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Road Traffic Reduction

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the Government's first report under the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Act 1998. [106040]

Mr. Hill: We have today laid before the House "Tackling Congestion and Pollution", our first report under this Act.

We agree with the Commission for Integrated Transport that we should not set a national road traffic reduction target. The national volume of road traffic is not a good measure of our success in improving the outcomes that matter, particularly congestion and pollution. Targets for air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, health and road safety are already in place or are shortly to be published. The report invites views on our proposal to develop new benchmarks and targets for congestion for different area or road types.

With widespread support from local authorities, businesses and the general public for the policies in the Integrated Transport White Paper and Transport Bill, we can also tackle congestion. The report shows that it should be possible to reduce congestion over the next decade, even when national traffic levels are rising.

The report shows that we can expect to see a reduction of more than half in the effect of traffic pollution on air quality over the next decade, mainly through better designed cars and fuels. We can also reduce emissions of greenhouse gases from road transport, though only to slightly below 1990 levels.

Council Tax

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the police authorities of England and Wales in order of their Band D council tax precept. [105181]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information requested on Wales is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

The information requested for England is shown in the following table.

Band D council tax precepts issued by English police authorities in 1999–2000

Police authority	*£*
Metropolitan	83
Lincolnshire	82
Staffordshire	79
Cumbria	78
Merseyside	77
Dorset	77
Northamptonshire	76
Surrey	75
Warwickshire	71
Wiltshire	69
Gloucestershire	69
Derbyshire	66
Essex	65
Norfolk	64
Leicestershire	64
Hertfordshire	64
Cleveland	63
Nottinghamshire	62
Bedfordshire	61
Avon and Somerset	61
Greater Manchester	60
West Mercia	59
Lancashire	58
South Yorkshire	57
Thames Valley	57
Cheshire	56
Suffolk	56
Humberside	55
West Yorkshire	55
Hampshire	54
Devon and Cornwall	54
Sussex	53
Kent	52
North Yorkshire	52
Cambridgeshire	52
West Midlands	51
Durham	50
Northumbria	50

HOME DEPARTMENT

Millennium Celebrations (Drug and Drink Offences)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many arrests were made in central London during the millennium celebrations for suspected offences involving *(a)* alcohol, *(b)* heroin and *(c)* cannabis. [104916]

Mr. Boateng: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that during the central London millennium celebrations the numbers of arrests for suspected offences were: *(a)* alcohol, 43; *(b)* heroin, nil; and, *(c)* cannabis, five.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters dated 21 September, 25 October and 9 December 1999 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Aftab Ahmed Butt. [105559]

Mrs. Roche: I am sorry my right hon. Friend has not received a reply to his letters. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has written to my right hon. Friend today.

Mike Tyson

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he made of the extent of potential financial hardship to British businesses and individuals of Mr. Mike Tyson not being granted entry to the United Kingdom; and what influence this had on his decision in this case. [105719]

Mr. Straw: In reaching my decision about Mr. Tyson's application for entry to take part in a sporting contest in Manchester on 29 January I had regard not merely to the financial loss which might ensue for a number of companies and individuals should Mr. Tyson be refused entry, but also to the potentially ruinous consequences of such losses to smaller concerns in particular, all of whom had acted in good faith in the expectation that the contest would take place. Together with the general effect on business in the Manchester area and the inconvenience and disappointment of the many thousands who had bought tickets for the promotion this was a significant consideration in reaching my decision.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received, and from whom, about the case of Mr. Mike Tyson. [105716]

Mr. Straw: Following a letter from the United Kingdom Immigration Service dated 11 January, Mr. Frank Warren, promoter of the sporting event, made representations about the entry of Mr. Tyson. These representations enclosed others from various companies and individuals with a direct or indirect interest in the promotion. In addition, representations and comments from a number of sources have been received at the Home Office. These are being registered and will receive a reply in due course.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the grounds which influenced his decision in the case of Mr. Mike Tyson. [105713]

Mr. Straw: In the special circumstances of Mr. Tyson's case I considered that it would have been invidious for an individual immigration officer to have to weigh the competing considerations involved. I therefore decided, having carefully examined the representations submitted by Mr. Frank Warren, promoter of the sporting event, to issue an instruction to the Immigration Service that Mr. Tyson should be granted leave to enter until 30 January 2000 for the purpose of taking part in the scheduled contest.

I considered that there were exceptional circumstances which justified my decision. In particular I was mindful of the evidence of the likely effects on the small providers of ancillary services, some of which might have faced bankruptcy, had the promotion been cancelled as a consequence of Mr. Tyson being refused entry. I also had regard to the effect of cancellation on business in the Manchester area and to the great inconvenience and disappointment which many thousands of boxing fans who had purchased tickets would experience.

I weighed these factors against the nature and seriousness of Mr. Tyson's convictions, and I decided on balance that the exceptional circumstances of this case were such that Mr. Tyson should be granted leave to enter for the purpose of the match. This decision was entirely consistent with the Immigration Rules.

In reaching my decision I also took into account the fact that in practice the Immigration Rule relating to refusal of entry on the ground of criminal convictions had not been applied consistently in the past. This Rule and the way in which it is applied will now be reviewed.

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what advice he gave to the Immigration Service about the case of Mr. Mike Tyson. [105717]

Mr. Straw: Generally the decision as to whether a person is or is not given leave to enter the United Kingdom is one for the immigration officer to take, considering any relevant representations and advice. The Secretary of State for the Home Department has the power under paragraph 1(3) of Schedule 2 to give instructions to immigration officers. Once the content and sweep of the representations about Mr. Tyson's entry were known I decided that it would be invidious for the decision to be made by an individual immigration officer and that it was appropriate to give instructions on this particular case given its high profile and complexity. After careful consideration I instructed the Immigration Service to admit Mr. Tyson for the purpose of taking part in the sporting contest at Manchester on 29 January.

Sinn Fein

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure that Sinn Fein complies with rules relating to the funding of political parties from overseas sources; and if he will make a statement. [105360]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In its report on the Funding of Political Parties, the Neill Committee recommended some adjustment for Northern Ireland parties, on a temporary basis, from the provisions on party funding which it recommended should be put in place. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill, which is designed to implement the Neill Committee's report, would accordingly allow my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to make such provision by Order. Consideration is being given to precisely what form the adjustment would take.

Firearms

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many firearms certificates were revoked in each of the last five years and in the current year in each police force area; and of these how many were revoked on the grounds of no good reason to possess the firearms in question. [105818]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Firearms licensing statistics for England and Wales are published annually in Home Office statistical bulletins, copies of which are placed in the Library of the House. The most recent bulletin (Issue 22–99) relates to the year 1998 and was published on 26 November 1999.

Although the statistics give details of the number of revocations in each force, no information is collected centrally about the grounds for this action.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made on the requirement for a national database under Section 39 of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997; and who is responsible for the implementation of that Section of the Act. [105817]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 does not specify the person or organisation which is to provide the central register referred to in section 39. It is being developed as part of the PHOENIX database of the Police National Computer, which is maintained by the Police Information Technology Organisation. As a next step a detailed impact assessment is to be carried out of the work which needs to be done to link the Police National Computer to existing firearms systems in forces. This is expected to be completed in April.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for each police force in England and Wales, if he will list the systems used to hold the register of privately held firearms and persons holding firearms certificates, naming each electronic system concerned; and if he will place a copy of the functional specification and user guide of each such electronic system in the Library. [105824]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand that most forces use or have purchased either the ORBIS system or the SHOGUN system, as set out:

Forces using ORBIS

Bedfordshire
Cambridgeshire
Cheshire
Cleveland
Dyfed-Powys
Essex
Gwent
Hampshire
Kent
Lincolnshire
Metropolitan
North Wales
Northamptonshire
Northumbria
Nottinghamshire
South Wales
South Yorkshire
Staffordshire
Suffolk
Surrey
Sussex
Thames Valley
Warwickshire
West Midlands

Forces using SHOGUN

Avon and Somerset
Derbyshire
Devon and Cornwall
Durham
Gloucestershire
Greater Manchester
Hertfordshire
Lancashire
Leicestershire
Merseyside
North Yorkshire
West Yorkshire
Wiltshire

Forces using other systems

City of London
Cumbria
Dorset
Humberside
Norfolk
West Mercia.

The functional specifications and user guides are not held centrally.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons held *(a)* certificates relating to the holding of (i) firearms, (ii) shotguns and (iii) explosives and *(b)* dealer certificates at the latest date for which figures are available. [105821]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The most recent year for which firearm certificate statistics for England and Wales are available is 1998. At the end of that year, 131,900 firearm certificates and 627,000 shotgun certificates were on issue, and 2,180 persons were registered as firearms dealers.

The most recent figures for explosive certificates for England and Wales relate to 1997. At the end of that year, a total of 6,794 certificates relating to the acquisition and keeping of explosives, and a further 2,432 relating to their acquisition only, were in force.

Local Crime Partnerships

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the progress of local crime partnerships in England and Wales. [105705]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The crime and disorder reduction partnerships brought into being by the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act published their strategies on 1 April 1999 and are currently implementing them. We recently published a national crime reduction strategy which includes measures to support partnerships and develop their effectiveness so that they can fulfil their potential.

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent from public funds on CCTV in each of the past 10 years; and what plans he has for spending on CCTV in each of the next three years. [105707]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the Crime Reduction Programme Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) Initiative, the Government are investing £153 million over three years on public area CCTV systems in England and Wales. We have already allocated nearly £40 million for 218 schemes and anticipate that expenditure under the first round could reach £64 million. The balance of the available £153 million will be allocated in years two and three of the Initiative.

From 1994 to 1999, a total of £38.5 million was spent under the Home Office CCTV Challenge Competition, as follows:

	Year	£ million
Round 1	1994–95	5
Round 2	1996–97	17
Round 3	1997–98	15
Round 4	1998–99	1.5

Crime prevention measures funded under the earlier Safe Cities Programme and the Single Regeneration Budget may have included elements of CCTV, but these are not separately identifiable.

Victim Support

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the funding for Victim Support in each of the last 10 years; and what plans he has for its funding in each of the next three years. [105709]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Home Office grant to Victim Support for the last ten years is as follows:

£ million

Financial year	Grant
1990–91	4.7
1991–92	5.7
1992–93	7.3
1993–94	8.4
1994–95	10.0
1995–96	10.8
1996–97	11.7
1997–98	12.7
1998–99	12.7
1999–2000	17.3

Following the last Comprehensive Spending Review grant for 2000–01 was set at £18.3 million and for 2001–02 at £19.0 million. Grant for 2001–02 and beyond is currently being reviewed in the current spending review.

Electronic Tagging

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many criminals have been electronically tagged in each year since the introduction of tagging; and if he will make a statement. [105710]

Mr. Boateng: In 1999, a total of 18,049 persons were subject to electronic monitoring. The great majority of these (15,320) were prisoners released on Home Detention Curfew under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

Information is not available in the form requested in earlier years. The available information for the period from July 1995, when trials of curfew orders under the Criminal Justice Act 1991 began, to the end of 1998 is set out in the table.

Description/period	Number monitored
Curfew order under the Criminal Justice Act 1991	
July 1995-June 1996	83
July 1996-June 1997	375
July 1997-December 1998	[1]—
Curfew order under the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997	
1998	232
Bail cases	
1998	72

[1] Not available

Violent Crime

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many violent crimes were reported and how many convictions there were for violent crime in each of the past 10 years. [105701]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The figures available cover the ten years to 1998 and relate to violent notifiable offences recorded by the police, and to persons convicted of violent indictable offences, and are as follows:

England and Wales

	Notifiable violent offences recorded by the police [1]	Persons convicted of violent offences [2]
1989	239,858	67,475
1990	249,904	63,909
1991	265,085	57,517
1992	284,199	53,601
1993	294,231	48,298
1994	310,332	47,009
1995	310,936	38,977
1996	344,768	40,345
1997	347,064	44,674
1998	[3]331,843	47,159

[1] Violent crime comprises the offence groups of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery. Figures for persons convicted are not directly comparable with recorded crime figures, as they relate to individuals found guilty, rather than offences.

[2] Covers offences within the indictable offence groups of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery.

[3] Estimate of the total for the year ending March 1999 using the coverage and the counting rules used up to March 1998. New counting rules were introduced on 1 April 1998.

Source:

Home Office Court Proceedings Database

Burglary

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent from public funds on measures to combat burglary in each of the last 10 years; and what plans he has for such spending in each of the next three years. [105706]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Details of individual police force expenditure in England and Wales on measures to combat burglary are not held centrally. However, burglary is one of the key strategic objectives of most of the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships. Centrally, of the £250 million budget for the Crime Reduction Programme, which runs from 1999–2000 to 2001–02, £62 million has been allocated to the Reducing Burglary Initiative. This Initiative supports projects undertaken by the Partnerships

which apply a range of anti-burglary measures. These projects are to be evaluated to identify what works and where, most cost-effectively.

So far, £4 million has been committed under the Initiative on the first 63 projects now under way. The balance will be allocated over the remaining two years of the Initiative with up to 200 round two projects beginning in March.

Police Manpower

Sir John Stanley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy to encourage police authorities to increase the civilian staff of police forces in order to release more police officers for operational duties; and if he will make a statement. [105422]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Staffing levels in a police force, whether police officers or civilians, are a matter for the police authority and chief officer to determine. It is my policy to encourage authorities and chief officers to make efficient and effective use of staff resources.

Police authorities have been required to plan and deliver efficiency gains of 2 per cent. year on year between 1999–2002. Efficiency gains totalling £440 million will be redeployed to support front-line policing. Civilianisation of non-operational posts can play a key role in releasing resources for operational work.

General Pinochet

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date he took the decision to ask for a medical report on General Pinochet. [105712]

Mr. Straw: I took the decision on 4 November 1999.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will supply the Spanish judicial authorities with a copy of the medical report carried out on General Pinochet. [105718]

Mr. Straw: Senator Pinochet consented to the medical examination on the express basis that none of its contents were disclosed to anyone other than his legal representatives, to me and my advisers, and to the Law Officers and Director of Public Prosecutions. Senator Pinochet has been asked to agree to Spain and the other countries with an outstanding extradition request being provided with a copy of the medical report. He has declined to do so.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received requesting him to make public the medical report on General Pinochet; and if he will make a statement. [105711]

Mr. Straw: I have received a number of representations asking me to make public the medical report on Senator Pinochet. I will make a full statement on the case when it is finally concluded.

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date the Chilean authorities requested a medical report on General Pinochet; to whom the request was made; and if he will make a statement. [105714]

Mr. Straw: On 14 October 1999, representations were submitted by the Chilean Embassy to me, through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, attaching recent medical reports on Senator Pinochet. They suggested that there had been a recent and significant deterioration in his medical condition.

I have a clear legal duty to operate the Extradition Act 1989 properly. In the light of the information from the Chilean Embassy, that duty included informing myself of the true facts about Senator Pinochet's health. I therefore asked him to undergo a thorough and extensive medical examination, to be undertaken by an independent team of clinicians.

SCOTLAND

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what figures he can require from local authorities about the composition of their work forces in terms of *(a)* standard age groups, *(b)* ethnic origins and *(c)* gender. [104013]

Dr. Reid: I do not collect figures from local authorities on the detailed composition of their work forces. In some cases, other UK Ministers may seek information direct from Scottish local authorities in areas reserved to the UK Parliament, although this information is unlikely to cover detailed composition of their work forces either. Any collection of information about local authorities' work in areas of devolved competence would be a matter for the Scottish Executive. It is, of course, for local authorities themselves, as independent corporate bodies, to ensure that they comply with employment law, including equal opportunity requirements.

Firearms Certificates

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many persons held *(a)* certificates relating to the holding of (i) firearms, (ii) shotguns and (iii) explosives and *(b)* dealer certificates at the latest date for which information is available. [105820]

Dr. Reid: The latest dates for which information is available regarding certificates relating to firearms, shotguns and dealers is the end of December 1998 and relating to explosives the end of December 1997.

At 31 December 1998, 31,072 persons held firearms certificates and 63,100 held shotgun certificates.

At 31 December 1997, 499 persons held certificates relating to the acquisition and keeping of explosives, and 64 held certificates relating to the acquisition of explosives only.

At 31 December 1998, 295 persons held dealer certificates.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland for each police force in Scotland, if he will list

the system used to hold the register of privately held firearms and persons holding firearms certificates, naming each electronic system concerned; and if he will place the functional specification and user guide of each such system in the Library. [105823]

Dr. Reid: This information is not held centrally.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Assets

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much of his Department's assets have been disposed of during each of the last five years; what valuation the Government puts upon his Department's assets; and if he will list his Department's assets, broken down by *(a)* the Department of Trade and Industry (Core Department) *(b)* agencies, *(c)* trading funds, *(d)* non-departmental public bodies, *(e)* research councils, *(f)* public corporations, *(g)* the Office of Fair Trading, *(h)* the Office of Telecommunications, *(i)* the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets and *(j)* the Export Credit Guarantee Department. [103603]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* *(a)* During the 1998–99 financial year tangible fixed assets comprising land and buildings to the value of £8,475,000 were disposed of. Information for the preceding four financial years is not available in the form requested.

The value of assets held by the Department of Trade and Industry (core department) as at 31 March 1999 is set out in the following tables:

	£000
Fixed Assets—Tangibles	
Land and Buildings	21,568
Office Machinery	235
Computer Equipment	3,079
Scientific Equipment	14,775
Telecommunication Equipment	70
Furniture, Fixtures and Fittings	3,127
Plant and Machinery	343
Total	43,197
Fixed Assets—Investments	
British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme Investment Reserve	1,059,000
Mineworkers Pension Scheme Investment Reserve	713,000
Ordinary Shares	32,668
Public Dividend Capital	72,214
Launch Investment	1,206,700
Loans to Trading Funds	6,237
Loans to Industry	5,160
Total	3,094,979
Current Assets	
Debtors	338,658
Short-term Investments	1,663,000
Cash at Bank and in hand	410,831
Total	1,663,000

(b)-(f) The net book value of assets held by ACAS on 31 March 1999 was £1,975,000, consisting of computer and office equipment, furniture, fixtures and fittings. Information on the assets of the Department's agencies, including its trading funds, of its larger executive NDPBs (those employing 25 staff or more, which are the Research Councils, the Gas Consumer Council, the National Consumer Council, the Design Council, the Coal Authority, the UKAEA, and the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (replaced by the Competition Commission on 1 April 1999)), and of the Post Office, BNFL and British Shipbuilders, can be found in their annual reports and accounts for 1998–99. These are available in the Library of the House.

(g) As at 31 March 1999 the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) considered the net book value of its assets to be £4.7 million. This was made up of IT hardware and software (£2.3 million), furniture and fittings (£0.1 million) and assets under construction (£2.3 million). All of the OFT's IT hardware assets have either been replaced or upgraded over the last five years. All redundant hardware was disposed of at nil value, having been depreciated out. There has been no significant disposal of furniture over the period. The OFT had no holdings of land or buildings over the period.

(h) Within the last year, Oftel modernised its run-down accommodation and office equipment. Most furniture and IT has been replaced or upgraded. Over the last four years, receipts for asset disposals were as follows:

Year	£
1995–96	2,316
1996–97	1,853
1997–98	150
1998–99	1,370

Note:
Only figures for the last four years are available

The draft resource accounts (unaudited) for 1998–99 show Oftel's net book value of assets as £979,000 including computer, other office and telephone equipment. Oftel's assets are recorded in the National Asset Register published by HM Treasury in November 1997.

(i) Offer: as at 31 March 1999
(extract from 1998–99 resource account)

£000

	Gross replacement cost @ 31 March 1999	*Net book value @ 31 March 1999*
Computer Pool	334	201
Computers	431	260
Furniture, Office Equipment Pool	233	127
Furniture and Office Equipment	200	157
Official Vehicles	98	83
Total	1,296	828

(i) Ofgas: As at 31 March 1999 (fixed asset, operating lease)

	Land and buildings	*Office equipment*	*Computer equipment*	*Laboratory*	*Fixture and fittings*	*Motor vehicle*	*London consolidation*	*Total*
Cost b/f	1,790,109	367,818	329,284	454,962	395,560	—	—	3,337,733
1999 Additions	43,957	—	518	—	48,496	13,865	1,823,472	1,930,308
Disposals	−140,000	−2,826	—	—	—	—	—	−142,826
Revaluation	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Indexation	183,407	11,680	0	0	48,869	458	—	244,414
Cost c/f	1,877,473	376,672	329,802	454,962	492,925	14,323	1,823,472	5,369,629

(i) Ofgas: As at 31 March 1999 (fixed asset, operating lease)

	Land and buildings	*Office equipment*	*Computer equipment*	*Laboratory*	*Fixture and fittings*	*Motor vehicle*	*London consolidation*	*Total*
Depreciation b/f	66,169	176,474	238,443	284,183	290,586	0	0	1,055,855
Charge for the year	73,383	73,564	65,960	90,992	88,811	2,773	911,736	1,307,199
Disposals	−5,600	−565	—	—	—	—	—	−6,165
Revaluation	7,336	2,336	0	0	9,774	92	0	19,538
Depreciation c/f	141,268	251,808	304,403	375,175	389,171	2,865	911,736	2,376,426
NBV-1/4/99	1,736,205	124,863	25,399	79,786	103,754	11,459	911,736	2,993,202
NBV-1/4/98	1,723,940	191,344	90,841	170,779	104,974	0	0	2,281,878

(j) ECGD has made no material disposal of property over the period. However, the nature of its operation means that it has disposed of the following assets over the period:

(a) Debt Sales: Since 1992 the Paris Club has been encouraging creditors to sell or convert a portion of their rescheduled debt. By the end of 1995–96 ECGD had successfully converted approximately £70 million of debts owed to it by Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tanzania and in 1996–97 seven sales involving Nigerian and Tanzanian debt, to the value of £20 million, were concluded. No sales were made in 1997–98 and 1998–99. (Source: Annual Report and Trading Accounts 1995–96 to 1998–99)

b) Forgiveness of Unrecovered Claims: Forgiveness of unrecovered claims for the last five financial years is as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1994–95	450.2
1995–96	14.6
1996–97	118.9
1997–98	115.6
1998–99	11.3

Source:
1998–99 Annual Report and Trading Accounts—Treatment of Forgiveness of Sovereign Debt

Plutonium Holdings

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the United Kingdom's civil plutonium holdings, indicating details of imports and exports. [104699]

Mrs. Liddell: Figures for the United Kingdom's civil plutonium holdings are published by my Department each year and are placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The most recent were published on 21 June 1999 covering holdings at 31 December 1998.

The publication of these figures is in the format agreed by an informal group of nine countries, as part of the international guidelines on the management of national holdings of civil plutonium. This is a format which facilitates international comparisons on a consistent basis.

Information relating to exports and imports of plutonium is no longer published, but the figures for separated plutonium show both the holdings in the United Kingdom belonging to foreign bodies and the quantity of plutonium belonging to the United Kingdom which is held in locations in other countries as of 31 December each year.

Military Exports

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if, in respect of each of the countries listed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Gilbert Murray Memorial Lecture on 11 January, he will list the *(a)* number and *(b)* aggregate value of (i) ECGD and (ii) other Government-supported credits approved by his Department in respect of exporting British military equipment to each of those countries in each year from 1987 to 1997. [105065]

Mr. Caborn: Of the countries listed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, ECGD support for defence-related business has been given only in respect of Kenya.

The number and value of guarantees in support of this business with Kenya are as follows:

1987–88: 1 guarantee valued at £20 million

1988–89: 2 guarantees valued at £43 million.

There are no other Government-supported credits in respect of exports of UK defence-related exports to these countries.

Chrysotile Asbestos

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what consideration has been given in the WTO to extending the market access of Canadian chrysotile asbestos; and what is the United Kingdom's policy on this issue. [104661]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* Canada has brought dispute settlement action in the WTO to challenge the French ban on imports and use of chrysotile asbestos. A final report by the WTO Dispute Settlement Panel is expected in May. Since the French ban was introduced, the UK and the EU have conducted further scientific analysis and have also taken action to ban the import of chrysotile asbestos on health grounds. The UK action came into affect on 24 November 1999. The EU requires all member states to have similar action by 1 January 2005. A number of specialised safety-critical uses are temporarily permitted until safe substitutes have been developed.

Company Assistance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what support his Department makes available to manufacturing companies based in non-assisted areas in *(a)* Chorley and *(b)* the North West. [105275]

Mr. Caborn: Support for manufacturers is listed at Annex A of the DTI report, "Manufacturing in the Knowledge Driven Economy". This report provides contact details for further information and can be found on the DTI website www.dti.gov.uk/comp/competitive.

In recent months my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has also announced a number of new initiatives which will assist in the creation and development of manufacturing companies: Regional Capital Venture Funds; a Phoenix Fund, the UK High Technology Fund and the Innovative High Growth Start Up Initiative which will be open to companies across the whole of the North West, including Chorley.

In addition, in the New Year my right hon. Friend announced the new Enterprise Grant scheme. This is part of the Government's response to the financing problems of SMEs. It is proposed that this will cover 64 per cent. of the population in the North West.

British Exports

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for the years *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1985, *(c)* 1990, *(d)* 1995, *(e)* 1996, *(f)* 1997, *(g)* 1998 and *(h)* 1999 the value of British exports of *(i)* goods and (ii) traded services to (1) the other 14 present members of the EU and (2) the three members of NAFTA. [105336]

Mr. Caborn: The available information is given in the following table. Consistent figures for 1980 and 1985 are not available. Details for exports of services by partner country are only available annually.

UK exports of goods and services—balance of payments basis

£ million

	1990	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*[1]
Goods						
Austria	694	1,126	1,267	1,157	1,185	945
Belgium-Lux	5,557	8,312	8,538	8,444	8,423	7,377
Denmark	1,390	2,113	2,216	2,089	2,050	1,688
Finland	1,034	1,718	1,818	1,569	1,435	1,111
France	10,762	15,290	17,132	16,581	16,466	13,774
Germany	13,007	20,274	20,761	20,650	20,611	16,654
Greece	672	1,047	1,141	1,046	1,051	911
Ireland	5,224	7,806	8,683	9,347	9,610	8,674
Italy	5,525	7,895	8,043	8,200	8,615	6,348
Netherlands	7,393	12,362	13,516	13,901	13,004	11,190
Portugal	1,016	1,471	1,683	1,750	1,717	1,397
Spain	3,780	6,110	6,738	6,730	7,171	6,242
Sweden	2,669	4,160	4,429	4,444	4,401	3,314
EU	58,723	89,684	95,965	95,908	95,739	79,625
Canada	1,919	1,804	1,970	2,147	2,178	2,132
Mexico	263	277	317	428	544	487
USA	13,042	17,901	19,761	20,901	21,702	20,032
NAFTA	15,224	19,982	22,048	23,476	24,424	22,651

[1] January to October

Note:
EU totals include exports to EU institutions.
Sources:
United Kingdom Balance of Payments, Pink Book, 1999, ONS. Monthly Review of External Trade Statistics, ONS

UK exports of goods and services—balance of payments basis

£ million

	1990	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
Services					
Austria	181	341	360	308	322
Belgium-Lux	801	1,440	1,415	1,577	1,722
Denmark	311	504	860	866	946
Finland	186	297	466	389	409
France	1,908	2,656	2,776	2,852	3,312
Germany	2,544	4,007	3,958	4,384	4,228
Greece	329	491	473	552	613
Ireland	853	1,926	2,168	2,255	2,412
Italy	1,096	1,468	1,581	1,687	1,835
Netherlands	1,067	1,775	2,017	2,299	2,535
Portugal	158	305	315	262	321
Spain	731	1,087	1,244	1,179	1,422
Sweden	561	817	907	948	1,078
EU	10,831	17,487	18,685	19,790	21,380
Canada	696	975	940	1,180	1,377
Mexico	102	143	104	145	148
USA	6,873	10,774	12,247	13,866	14,106
NAFTA	7,671	11,892	13,291	15,191	15,631

Note:
EU totals include exports to EU institutions.
Sources:
United Kingdom Balance of Payments, Pink Book, 1999, ONS. Monthly Review of External Trade Statistics, ONS.

EU Regional Funds

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action his Department is taking to ensure that assisted area status grants for the Sussex Coastal Strip are paid promptly by the European Commission. [105216]

Mr. Caborn: Payments of Regional Selective Assistance in the Assisted Areas in England are made by the UK Government.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received regarding the late payment of assisted area status grants to the Sussex Coastal Strip by the European Commission. [105215]

Mr. Caborn: None.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions he has had with the European Commission regarding grants awarded for assisted area status for the Sussex Coastal Strip between Shoreham and Newhaven. [105214]

Mr. Caborn: Discussions with the Commission on the proposals for new Assisted Areas, including the Sussex Coastal Strip between Shoreham and Newhaven, are continuing. We will announce the new map as soon as possible.

Anglo-French Trade Issues

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he next plans to meet the Prime Minister of France to discuss trade issues. [104206]

Mr. Caborn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry would not normally meet the French Prime Minister to discuss trade issues and consequently has no plans to meet him in the future. My right hon. Friend met his opposite number, the French Minister for the Economy, Finance and Industry, at the Anglo-French Summit in London in November 1999 and Trade issues were discussed at this meeting. In addition, I met the French Minister for Trade in October 1999 and we are in touch regarding bilateral meetings as and when the need arises.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

World Cup

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the economic benefits which will accrue to each nation of the UK as a result of the England World Cup 2006 bid being successful; what account was taken of such an assessment in granting Government assistance to the England World Cup 2006 bid; and if he will make a statement. [103752]

Kate Hoey: As the bid for the 2006 World Cup has been made by the English Football Association, and as all matches will be played in England if the bid is successful, no separate assessments of the economic benefits of holding the tournament in the Home Nations have been carried out. However, studies of the effects of major sports events held in the UK in the past strongly suggest that a successful bid will bring benefits to all parts of the UK. Sport England took account of these studies, together with analyses of the economic effects of previous World Cup tournaments, in considering its grant to the FA in support of the bid.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what was the cost of Government expenditure and support since 1997, other than in grants and loans, for the England World Cup 2006 bid. [103755]

Kate Hoey: The Government are fully committed to supporting the Football Association's bid for the 2006 World Cup, and Sport England has earmarked £3 million in grant-in-aid to the bid. Direct costs to the Government have arisen in respect of the previous Minister of Sport's visits to a number of countries in support of the bid. The cost of these visits was £102,780, although some other Government business was also conducted. Mr. Banks's duties as Special Envoy to the bid have involved further overseas visits, the costs of which are principally being met by the FA and by sponsorship, although the Government are making a contribution to these costs.

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when Sport England will publish its full accounts on its contribution to the FA (FIFA) World Cup 2006 bid. [104169]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* Sport England made an award of £3 million in 1998 in respect of the Football Association's bid for the 2006 World Cup. In accordance with the Accounts Direction for Sport England's National Lottery Distribution Accounts, that award was reflected within the overall totals for grant commitments in the annual accounts for 1998–99. To date, Sport England has paid £1,328,404 to the Football Association in respect of the bid. This and future payments in respect of the bid will be included in the overall totals of commitments met in Sport England's accounts.

Wembley Stadium

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment Sport England has made of the proposals for the English National Stadium at Wembley put forward by Wembley National Stadium Ltd. regarding the proposals' compliance with the Lottery Funding Agreement concluded between them. [104335]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* While Sport England were satisfied that Wembley National Stadium Limited (WNSL) and the Football Association had complied with the technical requirements of the Lottery Funding Agreement, the solution for athletics was not ideal. The DLA Ellerbe Beckett report raised serious concerns about the proposed solution for athletics in terms of the practicality and cost. Further discussions between my Department and all interested parties concluded that athletics should be removed from Wembley.

Sport England, the Football Association and WNSL are currently considering whether amendments are necessary to the existing Lottery Funding Agreement to reflect Wembley's new role as the centrepiece for football and rugby league in England. In the light of the prospective agreement, the Football Association has proposed that £20 million be returned to Sport England.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what discussions his Department has had with Sport England over the handling of the money agreed to be refunded by the developers of Wembley Stadium; and if these funds will be held separately; [105348]

(2) if Sport England has received any funds due to be returned to his Department in respect of failure by the developers of Wembley Stadium to provide adequate athletics provision; [105347]

(3) how much of the money due to be repaid to Sport England has been received to date from the developers of Wembley Stadium; [105349]

(4) on what date Sport England expects full payment of the money agreed to be refunded by the developers of Wembley Stadium. [105350]

Kate Hoey: As signatories to the Lottery Funding Agreement, it is for Sport England, the Football Association and Wembley National Stadium Ltd. to agree

the details in respect of the proposal to return £20 million of the Lottery award. Discussions are currently ongoing and a further announcement will be made in due course.

London Freedom Pass

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment his Department has made of *(a)* customer awareness of the London Freedom Pass and *(b)* uptake of the Pass. [105018]

Janet Anderson: This Department has made no direct assessment of customer awareness of the London Pass or its uptake. However, we understand that there has been widespread national and international media coverage about the London Pass since its launch on 10 November last year. Information about the pass is also available through British Tourist Authority and London Tourist Board publicity. The pass is purchased from a private company and currently allows free entry to 43 attractions in the capital.

The producers of the pass predict first year sales figures of 100,000 and they say that advance sales are looking healthy. We hope that the pass will widen access to a range of attractions and leave visitors to London more satisfied and ready to return again.

Royal Opera House

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many opera performances have been cancelled by the Royal Opera House since the publication of the new season's programme; and at what estimated cost in lost revenue income. [105339]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* The Royal Opera House has cancelled nine performances of opera since the opening season was announced in January 1999. I understand the overall loss to the Royal Opera House of the nine cancelled performances is estimated at £243,115 when the value of lost revenue is offset by savings in expenditure. The Royal Opera House's contingency budget will accommodate this loss.

Running Tracks

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make it his policy to provide support for the creation of running tracks in each district authority area. [105545]

Kate Hoey: The majority of Government money specifically allocated to sport and active recreation is channelled through Sport England, an independent body sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport which, within an overall policy framework set by the Department, dispenses these funds according to its own detailed policies and priorities.

Sport England is also responsible for overseeing the Sports Lottery Fund. Last year, it published its Lottery Strategy document which sets out the broad strategic framework within which it will distribute Lottery money to sport over the next ten years.

Sport England's Lottery Community Projects capital fund will invest £115 million per year between 1999–2000, with £21 million earmarked for projects requiring under £100,000, and will inject a total investment of £1.115 billion over the next ten years to sports capital projects, which could include running tracks, making a significant contribution to the sporting life of communities.

Local authorities may apply for Sports Lottery Funding for specialist facilities, such as running tracks, with the support of the governing body, UK Athletics, through the National Athletics Facilities Strategy.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to increase the number of running tracks in Lancashire. [105546]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend has no plans to increase the number of running tracks in Lancashire. The existing number of running tracks in Lancashire fully meets the requirements of Sport England's National Athletics Facilities Strategy, which was produced in partnership with the athletics governing body, UK Athletics.

However, we would both welcome any proposals for further investment in the sporting infrastructure in Lancashire to ensure that every community has access to as wide a range of facilities as possible, and that the opportunities to use them exist for everybody.

National Athletics Stadium

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what assessment he has made of the offer to adapt the City of Manchester Stadium to accommodate the British National Athletics Stadium; and if he will make a statement; [105550]

(2) when he intends to announce his decision on the location for a British National Athletics Stadium; and if he will make a statement; [105501]

(3) if he will make a statement on his plans for a British national athletics stadium. [105502]

Kate Hoey: Following the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 20 December 1999, Sport England has, together with UK Sport, UK Athletics, the British Olympic Association (BOA) and my Department undertaken further work on the non-Wembley options for staging international athletics events. Sport England is taking forward further work to establish the viability of possible alternative venues although the final decision on timing and location of bids for the 2005 World Athletics Championship and a UK Olympic bid, rests with UK Athletics and the BOA respectively, Although a final decision has yet to be made and no options have been ruled out, both UK Athletics and the BOA consider that the strongest option for a successful bid would be to base it in London. The BOA is therefore conducting a feasibility study of a possible future London-based Olympic bid, which they will submit to Government in the next few months.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action his Department has taken to identify potential sites for a national athletics stadium. [105346]

Kate Hoey: Following the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, Sport England has, together with UK Sport, UK Athletics, the BOA

and my Department undertaken further work on the non-Wembley options for staging international athletics events.

Sport England is taking forward further work to establish the viability of possible venues for the World Athletics Championships in 2005 and further details will be announced once this work has been completed. Sport England will also be assessing, with the BOA, the extent to which possible venues can be readily upgraded to accommodate Olympic requirements.

Tourism Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assistance his Department gives local authorities for employing tourism officers. [105049]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* This Department gives no direct assistance to local authorities for employing tourism officers. However, our guidance pack, "Measuring the Local Impact of Tourism", offers useful advice to tourism officers and others in measuring the value and volume of tourism in local authority areas. The results of any such work may help local authorities determine the number and nature of tourism officers they wish to employ.

Relevant and reliable statistics will also form a useful base for the Cultural Strategies my Department is encouraging local authorities to produces. These will express the local cultural vision and priorities in response to the needs and aspirations of local communities, as well as recognising the role of cultural services—including tourism—in tackling the wider objectives of social inclusion, regeneration, lifelong learning, and healthier and safer communities.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what percentage of tourists to the UK in the last year for which figures are available visited *(a)* the North West and *(b)* London. [105048]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* An estimated 23.4 million visits were made to the UK from overseas in 1998, excluding visits from the Republic of Ireland. Overseas visitors spent at least one night in *(a)* the North West Tourist board regions (encompassing Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Cheshire) on 5 per cent. (1.2 million) and *(b)* London on 52 per cent. (12.3 million) of these trips. Visits on which both the North West and London were visited will be included in the figures for both the respective regions.

Historic Buildings (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assistance his Department is giving to *(a)* Astley Hall and *(b)* other historic buildings in Chorley. [105036]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* My Department does not directly fund historic buildings. However, Astley Hall and other historic buildings in Chorley have received assistance from English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund as follows:

English Heritage

Astley Hall:
£9,000 (1983)
£7,100 (1985)
£5,000 (1987)
a further £4,750 was also made available in 1987

St. Georges Conservation Area Partnership Scheme (includes works to historic buildings)—£50,000 (1996–99)

Bank Hall—£25,478 offered to date

Heritage Lottery Fund

Astley Hall: No awards made

Lower Kem Mill: £68,530

Heapey and Wheelton War Memorial: £12,000

St. Paul's Church, Adlington: £64,200.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Family Law Act 1996

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to bring forward proposals to reform the law relating to divorce. [104881]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the written parliamentary answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) on 17 June 1999, *Official Report*, column 213W. The position remains unchanged.

Persistent Young Offenders

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the average period between arrest and sentencing for persistent young offenders in each of the last 10 years. [105702]

Jane Kennedy: The average time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders in England and Wales was 142 days in 1996, 141 days in 1997, 125 days in 1998, and an estimated 110 days in the first six months of 1999. Figures for earlier years are not available.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

"Raising Aspirations in the 21st Century"

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the cost of printing Raising Aspirations in the 21st Century; how many copies have been printed; to whom they have been distributed; and at what cost. [105301]

Mr. Wills: The cost of producing this document was £12,000. 5,000 copies have been printed. Copies were distributed at the North of England Education Conference in Wigan on 6 January 2000. Other copies have been distributed to interested parties on demand. Copies are available to others on request and are free of charge.

Summer Camps

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for introduction of informal summer camp activities for young people; what will be the initial cost, and funded by whom; who will be able to run such camps under official auspices; by whom they will be vetted and inspected; if a structure of certification and qualifications is envisaged; who will carry the liability for participants and third parties; and if he will make a statement. [105560]

Jacqui Smith: We envisage that a range of opportunities, including but not confined to adventure activities, will be made available to those 16-year-olds wishing to take part during the summer after their GCSEs, to help their transition between school and advanced study or work or training. The Department is working with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and with others, on how to take this initiative forward, including the matters mentioned by the hon. Member. We expect to make further announcements in due course.

Curriculum 2000

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the minimum number of sixth form students necessary for an 11 to 18 school effectively to implement Curriculum 2000. [104850]

Mr. Wicks: No assessment of the minimum number of sixth form students necessary for an 11 to 18 school effectively to implement the forthcoming reforms to post-16 qualifications has been made by my Department. A range of circumstances, of which student numbers is only one, will affect the ways in which schools and colleges implement the reforms. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has published detailed curriculum guidance on the reforms covering a range of relevant factors, including the size of the institution.

Youth Support Service

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria will be used to assess which careers guidance services are appropriate for transfer to the combined Youth Support Service; who will undertake this assessment; and what role interested partners will play in this process. [104695]

Mr. Wicks: We are creating a new service with a new vision to ensure that all young people have access to the support and guidance services they need, when and where they need it, co-ordinating the services currently provided by an array of different agencies concerned with different aspects of young people's lives. We expect that the best careers service companies, together with a range of other local partners, will play a major role in the new arrangements. At this stage no decision has been made regarding any assessment criteria. We shall be announcing shortly the key functions that we expect the new support service to perform and how we will involve major partners in developing and implementing the new service.

Teachers' Pensions

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out the rescheduled increase in employers' contributions for teachers' pensions in the next and future financial years, the actuarial basis of the calculation and the impact on the budget of each local education authority. [105100]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* The employer contribution rate for members of the teachers' pension scheme is currently 7.2 per cent. The rate from 1 April 2000 will be 7.4 per cent; from 1 April 2002 the rate will be 8.35 per cent.

The increase from 1 April 2000 is to fund improvements to scheme benefits which will be introduced from that date. The increase from 1 April 2002 is to eliminate the balance of liabilities identified by the Government Actuary's valuation of the scheme as at 31 March 1996. I shall shortly be laying before the House the Government Actuary's report on the valuation of the scheme.

Rescheduling the planned increase will reduce pressures on Local Education Authority budgets by £90 million in 2000–01 and 2001–02. The reduced pressure for each Local Education Authority is as follows:

Local education authority	*£000*
City of London	4
Camden	386
Greenwich	554
Hackney	455
Hammersmith	283
Islington	407
Kensington and Chelsea	182
Lambeth	490
Lewisham	565
Southwark	546
Tower Hamlets	631
Wandsworth	427
Westminster	297
Barking	375
Barnet	599
Bexley	471
Brent	542
Bromley	560
Croydon	628
Ealing	573
Enfield	616
Haringey	494
Harrow	361
Havering	437
Hillingdon	484
Hounslow	473
Kingston upon Thames	235
Merton	287
Newham	702
Redbridge	528
Richmond upon Thames	228
Sutton	352
Waltham Forest	488
Birmingham	2,213
Coventry	595
Dudley	526
Sandwell	590
Solihull	387
Walsall	546
Wolverhampton	490
Knowsley	373
Liverpool	1,041

Local education authority	£000
St. Helens	337
Sefton	537
Wirral	652
Bolton	516
Bury	316
Manchester	906
Oldham	473
Rochdale	429
Salford	414
Stockport	461
Tameside	421
Trafford	401
Wigan	547
Barnsley	383
Doncaster	594
Rotherham	507
Sheffield	859
Bradford	1,023
Calderdale	390
Kirklees	723
Leeds	1,285
Wakefield	568
Gateshead	345
Newcastle upon Tyne	480
North Tyneside	341
South Tyneside	301
Sunderland	558
Isles of Scilly	5
Bath and North East Somerset	274
City of Bristol	589
North Somerset	297
South Gloucestershire	414
Hartlepool	189
Middlesbrough	297
Redcar and Cleveland	287
Stockton-on-Tees	360
Kingston-upon-Hull	506
East Riding of Yorkshire	540
North East Lincolnshire	324
North Lincolnshire	284
North Yorkshire	973
York	266
Bedfordshire	712
Luton	385
Buckinghamshire	855
Milton Keynes	407
Derbyshire	1,207
Derby	428
Dorset	603
Poole	217
Bournemouth	245
Durham	889
Darlington	176
East Sussex	776
Brighton and Hove	370
Hampshire	1,973
Portsmouth	325
Southampton	383
Leicestershire	1,010
Leicester	584
Rutland	51
Staffordshire	1,411
Stoke-on-Trent	440
Wiltshire	705
Swindon	324
Bracknell Forest	181
Windsor and Maidenhead	226
West Berkshire	271
Reading	211
Slough	261
Wokingham	257
Cambridgeshire	843
Peterborough	348
Cheshire	1,156
Halton	258
Warrington	345
Devon	1,077
Plymouth	476
Torbay	220
Essex	2,326
Southend-on-Sea	307
Thurrock	268
Herefordshire	271
Worcestershire	874
Kent	2,465
Medway Towns	527
Lancashire	2,064
Blackburn with Darwen	309
Blackpool	239
Nottinghamshire	1,305
Nottingham City	506
Shropshire	441
The Wrekin	293
Cornwall	836
Cumbria	862
Gloucestershire	947
Hertfordshire	1,975
Isle of Wight	240
Lincolnshire	1,113
Norfolk	1,273
Northamptonshire	1,135
Northumberland	565
Oxfordshire	962
Somerset	780
Suffolk	1,109
Surrey	1,589
Warwickshire	824
West Sussex	1,195

TREASURY

Golden Jubilee (Commemorative Coin)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans Her Majesty's Government have to issue a coin to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne. [104810]

Mr. Gordon Brown: Her Majesty The Queen has been graciously pleased to approve my recommendation that in 2002 a crown piece should be issued to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Her Majesty's accession to the throne. Further details will be announced in due course.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the objectives and purpose of each working group participating in the Outline National Changeover Plan. [105658]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Details of the working groups are outlined in pages 8 and 9 of HM Treasury's "Third Report on euro preparations" which was published in November 1999. Copies of the report were placed in the Library of the House.

Beer Duty

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will reduce the duty on beer. [105357]

Mr. Timms: I cannot anticipate my right hon. Friend's Budget Statement.

Exports

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the effect of the strength of the pound on UK exports in the last 12 months. [105413]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Export volumes have grown strongly since early 1999, with the third quarter level up 6 per cent. on a year earlier, and CBI surveys show that exporters' optimism improved steadily throughout the year.

Smuggling

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of the smuggling of petrol and diesel into the UK in each of the last three years. [105359]

Mr. Timms: HM Customs and Excise does not have sufficient reliable information on which to base published estimates of the revenue lost through road fuel smuggling into the UK.

Information Technology Services Agency

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the outsourcing of the Information Technology Services Agency will be subject to pre-contract review by the Treasury PFI Taskforce. [105195]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Yes. The outsourcing of the Information Technology Services Agency is a part of the ACCORD PFI project with which the Treasury Taskforce is closely involved, and it will be subject to a pre-contract review which will be carried out by the Taskforce in association with the McCartney Committee which has been set up to examine the lessons that can be learnt from past Government IT projects and to give guidance on the conduct of future projects.

Interest Rates

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the annual cumulative savings to the Exchequer which would result from lower debt interest costs if United Kingdom interest rates were *(a)* 0.5 per cent., *(b)* 0.75 per cent., *(c)* 1 per cent., *(d)* 2 per cent. and *(e)* 3 per cent. lower across the yield curve for (i) 1999–2000, (ii) 2000–01, (iii) 2001–02, (iv) 2002–03, (v) 2003–04 and (vi) 2004–05. [105428]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The information is in the table.

Cumulative savings in debt interest

£ billion

Percentage point change in interest rates	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*	*2004–05*
-0.5	–0.3	–0.6	–1.0	–1.4	–1.8	–2.3
-0.75	–0.5	–1.0	–1.5	–2.1	–2.7	–3.4
-1.0	–0.6	–1.3	–2.0	–2.8	–3.6	–4.5
-2.0	–1.3	–2.6	–4.0	–5.5	–7.1	–8.9
-3.0	–1.9	–3.8	–5.9	–8.1	–10.5	–13.2

Note:
Figures shown are cumulative from the current year to date, i.e. the figures for 2004–05 represent the savings in debt interest over the whole five year period.

Benefit Claimants (Tamworth)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in Tamworth were unemployed and claiming benefit in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1999. [105152]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Brian Jenkins, dated 18 January 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on how many people in Tamworth were unemployed and claiming benefit in (a) 1997 and (b) 1999.

The ONS publish a monthly count of claimants of unemployment-related benefits. The claimant count consists of all people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or National Insurance credits at Employment Service local offices. They must declare that they are out of work, capable of, available for and actively seeking work during the week in which the claim is made.

The average unadjusted claimant count level in the Tamworth constituency was 1,775 or 4.5% of the workforce in 1997 and 1,633 or 4.1% of the workforce in 1999*.

* Average of 11 months: January to November 1999.

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what criteria are used to determine the civil service grades classified as politically free groups. [105615]

Mr. Stringer: Operating within the scope of the Servants of the Crown (Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Assembly Candidature) Order 1987, departments and agencies must allow civil servants in industrial and non-office grades the freedom to take part in all political activities.

DEFENCE

RAF Future Procurement

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons his Department ordered a review of the proposals for the RAF's airlifts requirement; and how long he expects this review to take. [104403]

Mr. Spellar: We are continuing to assess the proposals for both our short term and longer term airlift requirements. We are seeking the best value for money solution to our airlift requirements and hope to be in a position to make a decision early this year.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps, and at what cost, he is taking *(a)* to increase recruitment into the Territorial Army and *(b)* to increase the retention of personnel. [103929]

Mr. Spellar: Activity to attract recruits to the Territorial Army (TA) falls into two categories:

recruit marketing which is managed centrally by Headquarters Land Command and Recruiting Group and at local and regional level by Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Associations (TAVRAs), and

direct recruiting which is the responsibility of Unit Commanding Officers.

Over the last 12–18 months, recruit marketing work to maintain awareness of the TA and to engender a good recruiting environment for the future has comprised:

Date/event	*Cost*
1998–99 Normal trickle recruit marketing culminating in a major Spring Awareness National and Regional Campaign and TA Open Day (13 March 1999). This included the making of a new TV commercial.	£5.94 million
1998–99 Corporate Communication strategy developed and delivered in conjunction with Consolidated Communications PR. This included News sheets, Bulletins, leaflet, wide-ranging PR and Video.	£280k
1999–2000 By Spring 2000 the year's recruit marketing will have cost £5.3 million. Specific marketing includes a focused Army Medical Service TA Recruit Marketing Campaign (£500,000), an Autumn campaign mainly in cinemas, and a Spring campaign culminating in TA Day on 25 March 2000. The Campaign will include TV at National level, with support from radio and press at Regional level.	£5.3 million

It is not possible to identify separately the money spent by individual units on direct recruiting because these costs are inextricably linked to payments to individual soldiers.

As far as retention is concerned, the assurance given under the Strategic Defence Review that the TA would be fully resourced and that the TA is to be more usable, relevant and integrated, combined with realistic and exciting training on current equipment, will encourage volunteers to serve on. Over the last 18 months, a TA Retention Working Group has been producing a report which includes a Three Year Retention Action Plan. This contains a number of new ideas and initiatives. In advance of finalisation of the report, three relatively inexpensive but important measures have been achieved:

Introduction of a Retention Brochure—£25,000.

Introduction of TA Record of Service and Achievement (TARSA) with a TA soldier can use to record both his military and civilian skills, thus allowing a direct read across from one to the other—£50,000. It is planned that this work on TARSA should migrate into the pan-Army development of Personal Development Records (PDR), which is part of the Adjutant Generals Human Resources Strategy and links with "Learning Force Measures".

Setting of in-year targets for all units with a view to reducing the level of avoidable wastage from the TA. Overall wastage is currently about 30 per cent. and the target for 2000–01 will be set at 27 per cent.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what advice he has issued to the Territorial Army on compliance with the working time directive. [105624]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Raytheon Systems

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of the contract with Raytheon Systems for 5 Air Bourne stand-off radar will be spent with *(a)* UK-based companies, *(b)* other Europe-based companies and *(c)* US-based companies. [104833]

Mr. Spellar: About 75 per cent. of the contract will be spent with UK-based companies. The remainder will mainly be spent with US/Canadian based companies. Raytheon have undertaken to provide additional work to UK companies to bring the total to 100 per cent. of the contract value.

Medical Reserves

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action he has taken to implement the proposal outlined in paragraph 106 of the Strategic Defence Review to call out medical reserves at lower scales of effort; and what assessment he has made of the level of success in establishing this proposal without disruption to the National Health Service. [104807]

Mr. Spellar: My Department and the Department of Health are currently progressing work to assess the implications for the National Health Service of deploying substantial numbers of Territorial Army and other medical Reservists on military operations, should that prove necessary. The initial stages of this work are expected to be completed by this summer.

Kosovo

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the adequacy of accommodation for British forces in Kosovo in the absence of the planned temporary field accommodation; and if he will make a statement. [104798]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* In order to bridge the gap between the current in-service tentage and the more robust Temporary Field

Accommodation, an interim solution, known as Improved Tented Camps, has been put in place. This has been a great success which has provided warm, dry and comfortable accommodation and met with the approval of the British forces who use it.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Salisbury of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 92W, for what reasons the temporary field accommodation project in Kosovo was not fully deployed by December 1999; and under contract penalty clauses how much of the cost he will claw back from the contractor. [104797]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* The original requirement and camp build sequence were drawn up before UK forces had entered Kosovo. Delays have been caused partly by the need to change the requirement and Temporary Field Accommodation (TFA) camp build sequence to reflect the circumstances actually encountered on entry into Kosovo and partly by supply, communications, transport and technical problems experienced by the contractor. Improved tented camps have been made available which provide a good enhancement to accommodation standards. Under the TFA contract we are withholding a significant element of the payment for each camp pending completion and will seek liquidated damages where delay can be shown to be the fault of the contractor.

Royal Marines Rifle Range, Deal

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects the report on the long-term management of the redundant Royal Marines rifle range at Kingsdown in Deal, commissioned by his Department in 1988 and conducted by the consultants Mouchel, will be made available to Dover District Council. [105210]

Mr. Spellar: Mouchels sent their report to W. S. Atkins, as Dover District Council's technical consultants, on 7 January 2000.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received in connection with coastal protection work at the redundant Royal Marines rifle range at Kingsdown in Deal. [105209]

Mr. Spellar: My Department has received representations from, and been in dialogue over a number of years with, various individuals and bodies about aspects of the future of Kingsdown Range, including coastal protection issues. These include the present hon. Member for Dover and his predecessor as MP, Dover District Council, Kent County Council, Ringwould with Kingsdown Parish Council and a number of members of the public.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what action he intends taking in the immediate term to prevent the potential collapse of Undercliff Road at the redundant Royal Marines rifle range at Kingsdown in Deal into the sea. [105211]

Mr. Spellar: Undercliffe Road is a public road and neither the property nor responsibility of my Department, but of Dover District Council, who are statutorily empowered to take what action it considers appropriate to protect its road from the sea.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects works to commence to secure the long-term future of Undercliff Road at the redundant Royal Marines rifle range at Kingsdown in Deal in line with proposals made by his Department in May 1996. [105212]

Mr. Spellar: My Department did not in May 1996, nor has at any other time, make proposals to carry out work intended to secure the long-term future of Undercliffe Road. As a public road, it is neither the property nor the responsibility of my Department, but of Dover District Council.

Far East Prisoners of War

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the number of ex-servicemen and women who are former Far East prisoners of war. [105239]

Mr. Spellar: 50,016 Service personnel from the Armed Forces of the United Kingdom were captured by Japanese forces during the Second World War. No centrally collated figures exist of the number of former FEPOWS still living since, once their military liability had ended, any subsequent deaths of ex-Service personnel were not centrally recorded.

Sandhurst

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 89–90W, on Sandhurst, how many of the British officer cadets who were medically discharged from the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, in each of the years 1995 to 1999 received their secondary education at *(a)* Welbeck College, *(b)* state schools, *(c)* independent schools and *(d)* overseas schools. [105241]

Mr. Spellar: From the records available, the information requested is as follows:

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Welbeck College	2	2	3	2	—
State Schools	19	13	10	11	3
Independent Schools	18	11	7	3	3
Overseas Schools	1	—	—	—	—
Number Recorded	—	—	2	3	—
Total	40	26	22	19	6

Nuclear Deterrent

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made in implementing the aspects of the Strategic Defence Review relating to the nuclear deterrent; and if he will make a statement. [105643]

Mr. Hoon: The SDR conducted a rigorous re-examination of our deterrence requirements. The Government have made it clear that we shall maintain the minimum credible nuclear deterrent while working towards the global elimination of nuclear weapons. The longer-term goals of arms control, non-proliferation and multilateral disarmament were advanced considerably by a range of SDR measures. In addition to announcing Trident as the UK's only nuclear weapon system, these included: a reduction in the number of warheads

deployed in each submarine; a significant reduction in the size of the UK's total nuclear weapon stockpile; the de-targeting of Trident missiles; having only one submarine on deterrent patrol, and the placing of the submarine on deterrent patrol at several days' notice to fire. These measures have all been introduced.

Following a trial period of moving towards single crewing of SSBNs, we have however decided to retain double crews. This decision reflects our determination, as part of our policy for people, to minimise the pressure on our service personnel and give them greater stability and time with their families.

Married Quarters

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the locations where there are more than 100 married quarters. [105562]

Mr. Spellar: A list of locations where there are more than 100 married quarters is as follows:

Chivenor
Culdrose
Lympstone
Plymouth
St. Eval
St. Mawgan
Torpoint
Colerne
Corsham
Rudloe Manor
Devizes
Hullavington
Locking
Lyneham
South Cerney
Taunton
Warminster
Wroughton
Yeovil
Brecon
Chepstow
Haverfordwest
Hereford
Innsworth
St. Athan
Cosford
Donnington
Kineton
Lichfield
Nuneaton
Shawbury
Stafford
Ternhill
Blanford
Bovington
Poole
Portland
Weymouth
Andover
Larkhill
Middle Wallop
RAF Boscombe Down
Upavon
Wilton
Drayton
Eastney
Fareham
Hilsea
Marchwood
Old Rowner
Paulsgrove
Stamshaw
Thorney Island
Winchester
Worthy Down
Bulford
Tidworth
Aborfield
Bracknell
Hermitage, Thatcham
Sandhurst
Shrivenham
Aldershot
Waddington
Wittering
Dishforth
Fulford
Gatenby
Harrogate
Hemswell Cliff
Kirton in Linsey
Leconfield
Linton on Ouse
Ripon
Strensall
Topcliffe
Catterick (N)
Catterick (S)
Longhoughton
Newcastle-upon-Tyne
Benbecula
Lossiemouth
Aldershot North Camp
Bordon
Burghfield
Church Crookham
Cove
Deepcut
Farnborough
Odiham
Pirbright
Heston
Salamanca Park
Bushey
Mill Hill
Northolt
Northwood
Stanmore Park

Uxbridge
Whetstone
Chelsea
Hounslow
Kingston
Knightsbridge
Putney
Victoria
Windsor
Woolwich
Canterbury
Chatham
Dover
Maidstone
Shorncliffe
Abingdon
Benson
Bicester
Brize Norton
High Wycombe
Basic
Bassingbourne
Brampton
Chicksand
Halton
Henlow
Oakington
Waterbeach
Wyton
Coltishall
Honington
Marham
Swanton Morley
Colchester
Wattisham
Wimbish
Woodbridge
Chester
Preston
Sealand
Valley
Chilwell
Coningsby
Cranwell
Digby
Leicester (Wigston)
North Luffenham
RAF Cottesmore
Scampton
Churchill
Colgrain
Machrihanish
Rhu
Arbroath
Dreghorn
Leuchars
Longstone
Polton
Redford
Rosyth
Buchan
Elgin
Forres
Inverness
Kinloss.

Bullying

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what recent measures he has taken to stop bullying in the armed forces; [105223]

(2) what percentage of armed forces personnel who have gone absent without leave gave bullying as the main reason for absconding in each of the last three years; [105217]

(3) what is the recorded incidence of bullying in each branch of the armed forces for each of the past 10 years; [105218]

(4) if he will publish a breakdown by regiment of incidents of bullying in each of the past 10 years; [105219]

(5) if he will make it his policy to collate information on incidents of *(a)* racial, *(b)* sexual, *(c)* verbal and *(d)* physical bullying; [105220]

(6) what help is offered to victims of bullying in the armed services; [105221]

(7) how many armed forces personnel have been disciplined for bullying in each branch of the armed services for each of the last 10 years. [105222]

Mr. Spellar: There is not a specific military offence of bullying in the Services.

Any information provided on reported incidents or complaints of bullying, or what is perceived as bullying by the victim, leading to personnel being subsequently charged with a disciplinary offence, is complicated by the number of different specific charge which could be more generally interpreted as bullying. Furthermore, not all disciplinary cases are processed through the Court-Martial system; some cases of a less serious nature might well be dealt with by a Commanding Officer summarily, and are only recorded on local personnel files. Each individual file would therefore need to be searched manually to provide appropriate data. This could be completed only at a disproportionate cost.

Similar difficulties apply in determining whether Service personnel go Absent Without Leave (AWOL) because of bullying. The only way to determine a cause for AWOL would be to examine every Service interview record following the return of an absentee. This could be completed only at a disproportionate cost.

The Services policy, which is promulgated to all personnel, is that bullying, or sexual and racial harassment, will not be tolerated. Furthermore, before enlistment procedures are carried out, recruits are made aware of the Services' policies on bullying and harassment. It is the responsibility of officers and senior ranks/rates to preserve good order and discipline at all times, and this is reinforced on the appropriate training

courses. All allegations of bullying or ill-treatment are investigated, and depending on the strength of the evidence, appropriate disciplinary action is taken against the perpetrators. The policy of zero tolerance towards bullying was re-emphasised when the new code of social conduct was issued to all personnel on 12 January 2000. All these measures are kept under review and re-focused as necessary.

Additionally, the Services have produced Equal Opportunities Directives and pamphlets, which emphasise that bullying, and racial or sexual harassment are unacceptable, and give guidance on making complaints.

Within the last 18 months, the Services have also set up confidential telephone helplines. The contact numbers are well publicised throughout the Services and are accessible to all personnel. While there is some difference in the methods of operation, the Services hope that personnel will use the helplines should they be subjected to harassment or bullying, or would welcome advice if they wish to discuss issues in complete confidence. All those in positions of authority have a responsibility for personnel under their command. Individuals can make their case known through the chain of command, direct, to their commanding officer, medical officer or padre if they do not feel that the initial support offered is adequate.

All three Services have been required, since December 1997, to record and submit quarterly returns to the Ministry of Defence detailing all formal complaints to the chain of command of sexual and racial discrimination and bullying. The details of each complaint record whether the specific complaint is physical or verbal in nature. There are some differences between the Services in the way that information is recorded, and some of the information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The information that is available is being collated. I will write to my hon. Friend and a copy of my letter will be placed in the House.

Warships (Portsmouth)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the Royal Navy warships in Portsmouth Harbour at 0900 hours on *(a)* 2 January, *(b)* 9 January and *(c)* 16 January. [104925]

Mr. Spellar: The following Royal Navy warships were scheduled to be in Portsmouth harbour on the specified dates:

Warships in Portsmouth Naval base at 0900

Ship	*Type*	*2 January 2000*	*9 January 2000*	*16 January 2000*
Anglesey	Patrol vessel	Yes	No	No
Atherstone	MCMV[1]	Yes	No	No
Bangor	Mine hunter	Yes	Yes	Yes
Berkeley	MCMV	Yes	No	No
Bicester	MCMV	Yes	Yes	Yes
Birmingham	T42	Yes	No	No
Blazer	Fast training boat	Yes	Yes	No
Brocklesby	MCMV	Yes	No	No
Cardiff	T42	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cattistock	MCMV	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chiddingfold	MCMV	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dasher	Fast training boat	Yes	Yes	No
Edinburgh	T42	Yes	Yes	Yes
Endurance	Ice patrol ship	Yes	No	No
Fearless	Landing platform dock	Yes	Yes	Yes
Glasgow	T42	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gloucester	T42	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grafton	T23	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grimsby	Mine hunter	Yes	Yes	No
Guernsey	Patrol vessel	Yes	Yes	No
Hurworth	MCMV	Yes	No	No
Illustrious	Aircraft carrier	Yes	Yes	Yes
Intrepid	Landing platform dock	Yes	Yes	Yes
Invincible	Aircraft carrier	Yes	Yes	Yes
Iron Duke	T23	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leeds Castle	Patrol vessel	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lindisfarne	Patrol vessel	Yes	Yes	Yes
Liverpool	T42	Yes	Yes	Yes
Manchester	T42	Yes	Yes	Yes
Marlborough	T23	Yes	Yes	Yes
Middleton	MCMV	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newcastle	T42	Yes	Yes	No
Pembroke	MCMV	Yes	Yes	No
Puncher	Fast training boat	No	Yes	Yes
Pursuer	Fast training boat	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quorn	MCMV	Yes	Yes	No
Raider	Fast training boat	Yes	Yes	No
Richmond	T23	Yes	Yes	Yes
Shetland	Patrol vessel	Yes	Yes	Yes
Southampton	T42	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tracker	Fast training boat	No	Yes	Yes
Westminster	T23	Yes	Yes	Yes
York	T42			

[1] MCMV mine counter measures vessel

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the Defence Evaluation Research Agency. [105623]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) on 26 October 1999, *Official Report*, column 768W.

RAF Pilots

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how under strength the RAF is with regard to qualified *(a)* fast jet and *(b)* support aircraft pilots. [105620]

Mr. Spellar: The position is as follows:

	Requirement [1, 2]	*Trained strength* [3]	+/–
All ranks—Fast Jet	882	857	–25
All ranks—Multi Engine/Rotary Wing	1,315	1,360	+45
Total	2,197	2,217	+20
Junior Officer Pilot[4]—Fast Jet	554	459	–95

[1] Includes non-flying posts for which aircrew experience and knowledge are required. The majority of these non-flying posts require senior officers.
[2] 1 April 2000.
[3] 1 December 1999.
[4] Flight lieutenant (and squadron leader specialist aircrew) and below included in all ranks total. This is the RAF's most critical manning category.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many qualified *(a)* fast jet and *(b)* support aircraft RAF pilots are currently undertaking non-flying duties. [105619]

Mr. Spellar: The number of qualified pilots who, on 1 December 1999, were not filling specific flying appointments, was as follows:

	Number
All ranks—Fast Jet	298
All ranks—Multi Engine and Rotary Wing	428
Total	726

These pilots were either filling ground appointments or were on approved Manning and Training Margin activity, which included those undertaking further flying training.

Cancelled Military Activities

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will list the eight *(a)* NATO and *(b)* UN exercises that went ahead without the planned UK participation; [105617]

(2) if he will list the deployments and exercises cancelled in the 1999–2000 financial year to help *(a)* alleviate overstretch and *(b)* achieve financial savings. [105616]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Greater London Defence Estates Study

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Greater London Defence Estates Study will be completed. [105621]

Mr. Spellar: The initial phase of the strategic review of MOD's estate in the London area identified several proposals which could lead to further estate being vacated. Since then, in a still ongoing second phase of work, the current users of the estate have been undertaking detailed studies to verify the validity of these proposals and we expect to be able to announce some of the results arising from this work later this year.

Our review of the Estate in London, as elsewhere, is constantly evolving and in the case of the London Study there will be a further phase of work (Phase III) to take forward the implementation of the current work as well as to review the potential for further rationalisation of the London Estate.

War Stocks

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the inquiry into war stocks will be completed. [105622]

Mr. Spellar: Cm 3999 (The Strategic Defence Review) indicated that we would be looking at the longer-term scope for reducing the war reserves of ammunition and guided weapons as a result of longer post-Cold War readiness preparation times. A review of war reserves of key munitions and guided weapons is expected to be completed this year. Stockpiles of munitions will then be reviewed on a regular basis as part of the normal departmental planning process.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

EU Enlargement

15. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made on the enlargement of the EU following the Helsinki Council meeting. [104204]

16. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent developments in the European Union enlargement process. [104205]

26. **Miss Geraldine Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made on the enlargement of the EU following the Helsinki Council meeting. [104217]

Mr. Vaz: The Helsinki European Council agreed to invite six more countries to open negotiations in February and decided that Turkey is a candidate for membership. The European Council agreed that the EU should have institutional reforms in place and be in a position to welcome new Member States from the end of 2002. The UK fully supports these developments.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects Poland and Hungary to become full members of the European Union; and what assessment he has made of the implications for the Common Agricultural Policy. [104202]

Mr. Vaz: The Helsinki European Council in December agreed that the EU will make every effort to be able to receive new members from 2002. Poland and Hungary, like other applicant countries, have been making good progress in their preparations for enlargement. We want these countries to join the European Union as soon as they are able to meet the obligations of membership. It is too early to say when this will be.

Poland and Hungary both have significant agricultural sectors. Their membership will strengthen the case for further reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, which the UK supports.

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if, when he last met his colleagues from other member states of the European Union, they discussed matters relating to the enlargement of the EU and the timetable for the acceptance of the applicant states. [104207]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State discussed enlargement of the EU with his colleagues at the Helsinki European Council in December. The European Council agreed that the EU will make every effort to be able to receive new members from 2002. Applicant states have been making good progress in their preparations for enlargement. We want these countries to join the European Union as soon as they are able to meet the obligations of membership. It is too early to say when this will be.

Africa

18. **Liz Blackman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the United States over recent developments in Africa. [104209]

Mr. Peter Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier in the House today to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, North (Ms Ryan), column 678.

Cyprus

19. **Mr. Peter Atkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the efforts to find a settlement for the situation in Cyprus. [104210]

Mr. Vaz: We warmly welcomed the launch of UN proximity talks in New York in December preparing for the negotiations of a comprehensive settlement in Cyprus.

We strongly endorse the UN Secretary-General's intention to continue these talks early this year and will give him every support in his efforts.

Falkland Islands

20. **Mr. John M. Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the future status of the Falkland Islands. [104211]

Mr. Battle: We have good relations with the Government of Argentina. Former President Menem's visit to Britain assisted in the process of reconciliation and paved the way for the agreement of last July resolving communications with the Falkland Islands and co-operation on fish stocks in the South Atlantic. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary invited the Foreign Minister of the new Government to visit Britain and hopes to meet him next week in the margins of an international conference.

Indonesia

21. **Jane Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made over the future territorial integrity of Indonesia. [104212]

Mr. Battle: The statement by the EU Presidency on the situation in Aceh on 26 November 1999 makes it clear that we wish to see a peaceful resolution of separatist tensions in Indonesia. The EU supports in particular an inclusive dialogue between all concerned.

Drugs Trade

22. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action his Department has taken to combat the drugs trade, with particular reference to Latin America. [104213]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given earlier today in the House to my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy), columns 474-75.

Chechnya

23. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent meetings he has held with elected representatives of the people of Chechnya. [104214]

Mr. Vaz: I have not met Chechen representatives. FCO officials had a private meeting with two Chechen parliamentarians, Mr. Idigov and Mr. Magomedov, on 15 December to hear their views on the situation in Chechnya.

EU (Trade and Finance)

24. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made in co-operation with EU partners over matters of trade and finance in the past 12 months. [104215]

Mr. Vaz: We have been working closely with our EU partners to improve the functioning of the EU economy—work that will help to increase employment and prosperity throughout the 15 member states. That policy approach is outlined in the Presidency Conclusions from the Cologne and Helsinki European Councils.

Palestinian Refugees

25. **Mr. Quinn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation of Palestinian refugees in *(a)* Gaza, *(b)* the West Bank and *(c)* elsewhere in the Middle East, indicating the assistance Her Majesty's Government have given since 1969. [104216]

27. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Palestinian refugees. [104218]

Mr. Hain: At the end of 1998 the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) were caring for 790,000 refugees registered in the Gaza Strip, 560,000 in the West Bank and 2,220,000 elsewhere in the Middle East.

Through our bilateral contribution to UNRWA and our share of EU funding, we are the largest EU contributor to UNRWA, and the second largest contributor globally (second only to the US), so we make a very significant contribution to alleviating the condition of Palestinian refugees.

The status of Palestinian refugees is also of great importance, and among the main issues to be resolved in negotiations between the countries of the region. The Government have repeatedly made clear their concern for the Palestinian refugees. The Foreign Secretary visited Deir al-Balah refugee camp in the Gaza Strip on 25 October, and will tomorrow visit the Beqaa refugee camp in Jordan.

Russia

28. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next intends to discuss with his Russian counterpart attacks on Jewish people and their property in Russia. [104219]

Mr. Keith Vaz: Anti-semitism and other human rights issues are regular subjects of discussion in my meetings with my Russian counterpart. My officials also raised our concerns on anti-semitism in the recent annual UK/Russia human rights talks in London.

We will continue to be active on this issue.

Iran

29. **Mr. Fabian Hamilton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last made representations to the Government of Iran on the 13 Jews arrested on charges of espionage. [104220]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary raised the cases of those detained on espionage charges, including 13 members of the Iranian Jewish community, with Foreign Minister Kharrazi during his visit from 10–12 January. Dr. Kharrazi assured them both that those detained would receive a fair trial including access to families and legal representation.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations he has made to the Government of the Russian Federation relating to the supply of missile-related goods and technology to Iran. [104771]

Mr. Hain: We are concerned that a number of Russian companies and institutions may have exported missile-related goods and technology to Iran. This would not be consistent with Russia's commitments under the terms of the conventions and export control regimes of which she is a member.

We regularly discuss these concerns with the Government of the Russian Federation, both bilaterally and in multilateral fora, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).

During the visit of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary to Russia from 3–5 March 1999, he discussed the dangers of exporting weapons and related technology to the Middle East.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent reports he has received on Iran's ability to produce missiles with a range of more than 500 miles. [104768]

Mr. Hain: In conjunction with other government departments we regularly assess Iran's ability to produce long range ballistic missiles, drawing on numerous sources.

We and our EU partners remain concerned by Iran's development of the Shahab-3 ballistic missile, with a range of 1300kms. We regularly engage the Iranian authorities on proliferation issues and have urged Iran to refrain from the further development of such missiles, while understanding Iran's legitimate security concerns.

We are aware that Iran has ambitions to develop a satellite launch vehicle capability.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Iran since the testing of the Shahab-3 missile in July 1999. [104855]

Mr. Hain: We have established regular dialogue with the Government of Iran on non-proliferation issues. During our contacts, while mindful of legitimate Iranian security concerns, we have repeatedly stressed the importance we attach to global efforts to limit the development of long range ballistic missiles, and shall continue to do so.

During the official visit to the UK of the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Kamal Kharrazi from 10–12 January, Dr. Kharrazi and the Secretary of State agreed to continue dialogue on bilateral, regional and international political issues.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what intelligence reports he has received regarding the range, payload capacity and purpose of the Shahab-4 missile currently under development in Iran. [104857]

Mr. Hain: My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East will understand the security constraints that prevent us from discussing intelligence reporting.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on his assessment of Iran's capability to produce nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and their delivery systems without outside help. [104854]

Mr. Hain: In conjunction with other Government Departments, we regularly assess the status of efforts by a number of countries to develop or acquire weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. Such assessments draw heavily on intelligence sources and we are therefore unable to comment further.

Iran is a Non-Nuclear-Weapon State Party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. We continue to encourage Iran to respect these treaties and to comply fully with its obligations under them.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of *(a)* the evidence of the involvement of Hamas in terrorism and *(b)* the threat from Hamas to UK interests. [104859]

Mr. Battle: Any such assessment of Hamas's involvement could only be made from intelligence sources and would, therefore, be exempted from disclosure under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Hamas leaders have repeatedly stated publicly that their area of activity is Israel and that they have no policy of attacking external interests. UK interests are therefore not directly targeted, although we condemn terrorism in all its forms and at whomever it is directed.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the evidence concerning financial links between Iran and Hamas; and if he will make a statement. [104858]

Mr. Battle: This Government and our EU colleagues have frequently raised with the Iranians our concerns about their support for groups who use violent methods to oppose the Middle East Peace Process and will continue to do so. Any assessment by HMG of the extent of the financial links could only come from intelligence and is, therefore, exempted from disclosure under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the range of the Shahab-3 missile tested by Iran in July 1999 and of the countries that fall within its range. [104856]

Mr. Hain: We regularly discuss proliferation issues with Iran and have frequently expressed our concern about Iranian attempts to develop ballistic missile systems. We remain particularly concerned by Iran's development of the Shahab-3 ballistic missile, with a range of 1,300kms and therefore capable of reaching any of the neighbouring countries within this range. Such a system could pose a threat to stability in the region.

Iran is not the only country in the region to possess such technology, and we understand Iran's legitimate security concerns. However we continue to urge Iran to refrain from the development of ballistic missiles.

Iraq

30. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK's relationship with Iraq. [104221]

Mr. Hain: As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, our relationship with Iraq is governed by the need to ensure Iraqi compliance with its obligations under Security Council resolutions. The most recent of these is SCR 1284, adopted on 17 December, after months of negotiations led by the UK. SCR 1284 establishes a new platform for the UN's dealings with Iraq, with provisions covering disarmament, humanitarian and Kuwaiti issues. Our priority now is its implementation.

Middle East Peace Process

31. **Mr. Wyatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the middle east peace process. [104222]

Mr. Hain: We welcome the recent progress in the resumption of talks on the Syrian track. Progress will undoubtedly be hard work, but both sides have already shown a high degree of commitment to intensive talks and we hope a just and lasting agreement will follow.

Implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh Memorandum by the Israelis and Palestinians is proceeding again, after a short hiatus. We wish both parties every success in their negotiations towards a Framework Agreement for Permanent Status, due in February. The United Kingdom will support them in any way it can in their search for an agreement.

Montenegro

32. **Mr. Randall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Government policy towards Montenegro. [104223]

34. **Mr. Lidington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Montenegro. [104225]

Mr. Vaz: The UK Government are keeping a close eye on the situation in Montenegro. We continue to support the reformist and democratic Government of President Djukanovic and will work with our EU partners to encourage the extension of the culture of democracy in Montenegro to the whole of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Intergovernmental Conference

33. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals for treaty changes he plans to place on the agenda at the forthcoming Inter-Governmental Conference. [104224]

Mr. Keith Vaz: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary earlier in the House today to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), columns 668-69.

EU Charter of Fundamental Rights

35. **Mrs. Roe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the expected contents of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [104226]

Mr. Keith Vaz: The Charter drafting body has only just started its work. The first meeting on 17 December 1999 was largely procedural. The next meeting on 1–2 February will be the first opportunity to discuss substance, though exchanges at this stage are likely to be fairly general. But the conclusions of the Cologne European council in June 1999 provide an indication of the ground that might be covered.

Nuclear Proliferation

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department has received a copy of the report of the US Director of Central Intelligence made to the US Congress on 2 February 1999 on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions; and if he will make a statement on its contents. [104782]

Mr. Hain: The Department of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs is aware of the report referred to by my hon. Friend, but did not receive a copy.

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last made representations to the Russian Government about the role Russian companies are playing in the construction of the nuclear power plant in Bushehr, Iran; and what assurances he has sought to ensure that the plant is purely for civilian use. [104785]

Mr. Vaz: In March 1999 my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed with Foreign Minister Ivanov the dangers of arms exports and technology assistance to countries of concern. Officials also raise these concerns, including the specific case of Bushehr, during regular meetings with the Russians on export control and strategic stability issues. The Russians assure us that their assistance for Bushehr is limited to civil nuclear applications and subject to IAEA safeguards. We are watching the situation closely.

State-sponsored Terrorism

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what data his Department compiles on countries which sponsor terrorist organisations; and if he will publish it. [104770]

Mr. Battle: This Government condemn state sponsorship of terrorism and monitor closely any evidence of such activities. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office makes the responsible Governments aware of our concerns when they arise. The information the hon. Member asks to be published is, however, exempted from disclosure under Exemption 1 (Defence, Security and International Relations) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Ethiopia

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action the Government are taking to encourage the Ethiopian administration to accept the technical arrangements for the implementation of the framework agreement to resolve the conflict with Eritrea. [104804]

Mr. Hain: We have made it clear to Ethiopia and Eritrea that we and the international community want an early and negotiated settlement to this conflict. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development and I underlined this message in meetings with the Ethiopian Foreign Minister on 9 December.

Since then, the Ethiopian Government has received from the Organisation of African Unity clarification of several queries about the Technical Arrangements. We now await a response from the Government.

France

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he next plans to meet representatives of the Government of France; and if he will make a statement. [105010]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary next plans to meet Foreign Minister M. Hubert Vedrine at the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 24 January. I met members of the French Government at the Franco—British colloque on 14 January.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role of the British Embassy in Paris in easing the plight of British hauliers in France. [105011]

Mr. Vaz: During the recent road haulier's dispute in France, the British Embassy in Paris was in regular contact with the French authorities at both the national and local levels. Their aim was to encourage an early end to the dispute and to ensure the safety and well-being of British drivers. The Embassy also provided regular updates and advice on the situation in France to the Road Hauliers Association and the Freight Transport Association in the UK, to British drivers stranded in France, and to Government Ministries in Whitehall. The Freight Transport Association has thanked the Embassy for their advice and assistance.

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last spoke to a representative of the Government of France; and if he will make a statement. [105009]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is in regular contact with Foreign Minister M. Hubert Vedrine and maintains a dialogue with him on a wide range of issues of mutual interest. I also meet my counterpart, M. Pierre Moscovici, regularly.

Libyan Scud Missiles

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what date he was first informed of the discovery at Gatwick Airport of scud missile parts en route to Libya; and what considerations underlay the timing of the release of information on the matter to the media. [105080]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 326W.

"Your Britain, Your Europe" Roadshow

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the constituencies visited by the "Your Britain, Your Europe" Roadshow; and how the destinations were chosen. [105693]

Mr. Vaz: I visited Newcastle, Hull, Rotherham, Manchester, Bristol, Bath, Nuneaton, Birmingham and Leicester, each of which is a regional centre of population. This covered the constituencies of: Sedgefield; Tyne Bridge; Gateshead and Washington, East; Houghton and Washington, East; Hull, North; Rotherham; Manchester, Central; Wythenshawe and Sale, East; Bristol, South; Bath; Nuneaton; Birmingham Ladywood and Leicester, South. In each town or city we visited a variety of venues to meet a broad spectrum of society. This included calls on EU funded projects and visits to companies, schools and universities. All local Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament were informed of my visit and given the opportunity to participate.

European Court of Justice

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the European Court of Justice has completed the review of its operations and procedures; and if he will place a copy of the review in the Library. [105720]

Mr. Vaz: The Court of Justice submitted a paper to the Council of Ministers on 10 May putting forward ideas on the future of the European Union's judicial system. A copy of the paper has been placed in the Library.

The proposed reforms are designed to improve the workings of the Court, including greater flexibility in the application of the Court's Rules of procedure to facilitate the handling of complex or urgent cases. The proposals should therefore allow the Court to cope more quickly and efficiently with its ever increasing workload.

Some of the proposed reforms would require Treaty change. These might be considered by member states either as part of the IGC or in parallel process.

International Criminal Court

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made on establishing an International Criminal Court; and if he will make a statement. [104198]

Mr. Hain: The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court was adopted on 17 July 1998. Since then 92 States, including the UK, have signed the Statute and six have ratified. The Court will be established once 60 States have ratified. A Preparatory Commission is making good progress on drafting important subsidiary documents to the Statute.

India (UK Citizens)

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received about United Kingdom citizens experiencing difficulties in arranging for funds to be remitted from bank accounts in India to the UK; and if he will make a statement. [104901]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* We are aware of the difficulties faced by UK citizens in remitting funds from India. High Commission staff in India are active in assisting UK citizens in this process. We recognise, however, that this can often be a lengthy process which is bound by the relevant Indian exchange regulations.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the *(a)* Government of Sri Lanka and *(b)* Tamil forces on the resolution of the conflict in Sri Lanka. [104908]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* We remain deeply concerned about the tragic conflict in Sri Lanka and believe that a lasting solution can be reached only through a political settlement. We continue to explore with a wide range of contacts ways of achieving this.

Pursuant to my previous answer to my hon. Friend on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 401W, we have made clear to both sides our readiness to help if asked.

PRIME MINISTER

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list those areas identified by EU member states for discussion of extension of qualified majority voting at the next InterGovernmental Conference. [105541]

The Prime Minister: The Helsinki European Council confirmed that the possible extension of qualified majority voting will be on the agenda for the next IGC. Formal proposals for individual articles will only be made during the IGC, which will begin next month.

Iranian Foreign Minister

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his recent meeting with the Iranian Foreign Minister. [105340]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* I welcomed Dr. Kharrazi as the first Iranian Minister to visit the United Kingdom since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. I stressed the importance we attach to continuing the development of the relationship between the UK and Iran, as a major country in an area of strategic importance to the UK.

Dr. Kharrazi and I agreed that relations between the UK and Iran should be based on co-operation and mutual trust.

There of course remain areas of concern for both sides. I raised with Dr. Kharrazi the continued detention of 13 members of the Jewish community in Iran. Dr. Kharrazi assured me that those detained would receive a fair and open trial, including access to visitors and legal

representation. I also mentioned our concern that Iranian commitments on Salman Rushdie's safety should be upheld.

Mike Tyson

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister what representations he and his Office received, and from whom, about the case of Mr. Mike Tyson. [105715]

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray), asked me a Question on the floor of the House on 12 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 271. Neither I nor my Office have received any other representations on this matter.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

House of Lords

Angela Smith: To ask the President of the Council when the report of the Royal Commission on Reform of the House of Lords will be published. [105603]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the Royal Commission proposes to publish its Report on Thursday 20 January. Copies of the Report will be placed in the Library of the House after publication.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Staff Bonuses

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies spent in total on extra bonuses above usual payments for staff working over the New Year period; what were the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum bonuses paid; how many people received the (i) maximum and (ii) minimum payments; and if he will make a statement. [104480]

Mr. Morley: No extra bonuses were paid to core-MAFF, Pesticides Safety Directorate, Veterinary Medicines Directorate, Farming and Rural Conservation Agency, Central Science Laboratory, Meat Hygiene Service, Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and Intervention Board Executive Agency staff working over the New Year period. Staff working, or on-call, during this period received enhanced rates of overtime, travel time and on-call allowances. Claims are still being received and it is therefore not possible at this stage to say how many staff in total benefited from these arrangements.

The Veterinary Laboratory Agency also adopted the same arrangements but, in addition, paid a £100 bonus to staff working between 11.00 pm on 31 December 1999 to 4.00 am on 1 January 2000. Again, claims are still being received and it is not possible at this stage to say how many staff in total benefited from the bonus payment.

Biocides

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what assessment he has made of the health implications of the cocktail effect of exposure to several different types of biocides; [104526]

(2) what steps he takes to protect citizens from the cocktail effect of exposure to several different types of biocides. [104525]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* The possibility of interactions with other pesticides is considered before approval is given to a particular pesticide. Possible synergistic effects of the joint toxicity of pesticide active ingredients are addressed by requesting data on the toxicity of new pesticide products that contain more than one active ingredient.

The pesticide regulatory authorities have also examined more broadly the possibility of synergistic effects of pesticides several times. The Advisory Committee on Pesticides considered the matter in the early 1990s and advised that possible interactions of pesticides were at worst additive rather than synergistic. In 1994 MAFF commissioned a literature review of the possible synergistic effects of mixes of active ingredients. The results of this review supported the Advisory Committee's earlier conclusion.

More recently, the interaction between the effects of chemicals was also considered by the Department of Health's Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment as part of their review of organophosphates. The Committee advised that interactions resulting from altered metabolism are, in general, only important at relatively high exposure levels, since at low levels there is usually sufficient metabolic capacity to cope with the multiple exposures with efficient detoxification and elimination of all compounds.

Beta Carotene

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of the safety of the additive beta carotene, with particular reference to the concentrations available in soft drink products. [104529]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* Beta carotene is naturally present in a wide variety of foods. It is also added to foods as a means of providing additional Vitamin A to consumers (it is converted to Vitamin A in the body). In addition, it may be used as a food colour.

There is no evidence that the amounts consumed by adults and children from food are harmful. However, the UK Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals will be reviewing the safety of this substance later this year as part of a wide ranging study of the safety of vitamins and minerals generally. In addition, the EU Scientific Committee for Food is currently considering the safety aspects of its use as a colour. Intakes from this latter source are however low compared to its use as a source of Vitamin A and its natural occurrence.

Food Labelling

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps his Department is taking to ensure that products that do not meet United Kingdom quality and animal welfare standards are labelled accordingly. [105111]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* Consumers who wish to support British quality and animal welfare standards tell us they actively choose foods which

are marked as British. Following concerns that such labelling can sometimes mislead, we have consulted a wide range of interested parties on strengthened guidance aimed at ensuring that country of origin markings on food labels do not mislead consumers about the true origin of the ingredients that have been used. Officials will be discussing the responses with some of those consulted on 19 January and an announcement will be made shortly thereafter.

Organic Farming (Lancashire)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many hectares of land in Lancashire are used for organic farming. [105034]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* From the information available to us, some 2,500 hectares in Lancashire are fully organic or are in conversion to organic farming.

Abattoirs and Meat Processing Plants

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many abattoirs and meat processing plants have closed in the last year for which figures are available. [103355]

Ms Quin: The Meat Hygiene and Inspection Regulations provide for licences to be revoked for a number of different reasons. These include where premises either fail to comply with hygiene requirements or cease operating for commercial reasons; and where the nature of the business has changed. In Great Britain, 39 abattoirs and 58 cutting premises producing fresh meat or poultry meat had their licences revoked between 1 November 1998 and 30 October 1999. Details of licence revocations are published in the Meat Hygiene Enforcement Report, a copy of which is placed in the Library of the House each month.

GM Crops

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, (1) pursuant to the answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 541W, on GM crops, if he will identify the evidence with which he has been provided concerning the quantities of GM pollen found in honey, indicating that on which he bases his assessment that such quantities are very small; [102841]

(2) pursuant to the answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 541W, on GM crops, what consultations he has held with consumers on the acceptability of traces of GM pollen in honey, indicating the *(a)* dates and *(b)* manner of the consultation, and the advice he received; [102829]

(3) pursuant to the answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 541W, on GM crops, if he has carried out an economic analysis of the impact of United Kingdom honey containing GM pollen on the British beekeeping and honey industry; [102830]

(4) pursuant to the answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 541W, on GM crops, if he will list the research on which both ACRE and ACNFP based their advice to him that they do not consider the presence in honey of pollen from GM crops to pose a risk to health; [102831]

(5) pursuant to the answer of 8 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 541W, on GM crops, what consultations he has held with beekeepers on the acceptability of traces of GM pollen in honey, indicating *(a)* the organisations and individuals he consulted, *(b)* the dates of meetings and *(c)* the advice given to him. [102832]

Ms Quin: All GM crops intended for deliberate release in this country, and indeed in the rest of the European Community, are thoroughly assessed for human and environmental safety in accordance with the requirements of EC Directive 90/220 before they are allowed to be planted. This assessment, which is carried out in the UK by ACRE, includes the safety implications of any exposure to pollen through ingestion or inhalation.

The ACNFP considered the issue of GM pollen in honey at a workshop held in 1991 and concluded that the safeguards provided by ACRE and other Government advisory committees were adequate. The Committee also concluded that the ingestion of protein from pollen in honey was likely to be very small, typically around 0.00007 g to 0.003 g per day, and did not give rise to any health concerns. A copy of the 1991 and 1992 ACNFP Annual Reports which contain the conclusions of this workshop are available in the Library of the House.

Since then, the Laboratory of the Government Chemist has undertaken research on the pollen content of honey, at MAFF's request, and has confirmed that levels of GM protein are likely to be several orders of magnitude lower than previously thought. It estimated that consumers would ingest at most no more than 30 picogrammes (0.00000000003 g) to 5 nanogrammes (0.000000005 g) of transgenic protein in every 500 g of honey. The report of this research has been available in the MAFF Library since its completion but I am now arranging for it to be deposited in the Library of the House. In addition to this work, the British Honey Importers and Packers Association report on their website that they have found no traces of GM material in any of the honey they have tested to date. As a result of all these findings we see no reason to undertake an economic analysis of the impact of United Kingdom honey containing GM pollen on the British beekeeping and honey industry.

My noble Friend the Minister of State (Baroness Hayman) has not held consultations with consumers or beekeepers on the acceptability of traces of GM pollen in honey, however, officials hold regular meetings with representatives from the beekeeping industry and honey producers and importers to discuss issues of mutual concern including the development of GM crops. The last such meeting took place on 10 November.

The ACNFP has an independent member, representing consumer interests, who would be consulted on any changes to the Committee's view on the acceptability of traces of GM pollen in honey. Consumers' organisations, along with other interested parties, were consulted on the recent EC proposals to introduce a threshold of 1 per cent. for the adventitious contamination of non GM soya and maize, in respect of the labelling of food and food ingredients.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information is routinely available to him on NHS waiting lists for *(a)* all services that are not normally consultant-led and *(b)* audiology. [104310]

Mr. Denham: Information is available on National Health Service waiting lists only for services which are consultant led. In audiological medicine, 61 per cent. of patients were seen within 13 weeks and 80 per cent. within 26 weeks of being referred by their general practitioner.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health in the last year for which figures are available, how many people in each NHS region on NHS waiting lists are aged *(a)* under 29, *(b)* 30 to 49, *(c)* 50 to 64, *(d)* 65 to 74, *(e)* 75 to 84 and *(f)* 85 years and over. [103955]

Mr. Denham: Data are not collected by age group on the number of patients in each National Health Service region currently on National Health Service waiting lists. The total number of patients on NHS waiting lists is, however, collected by each region and is shown in the table.

Monthly inpatient waiting list data by Regional Office area (NHS Trust based)

Month	Northern and Yorkshire	Trent	West Midlands	North West	Eastern	London	South East	South West	England
October 1998	142,168	115,061	106,860	185,121	134,756	195,053	203,211	111,253	1,193,483
November 1998	138,213	112,850	103,339	180,827	131,285	187,694	198,384	109,470	1,162,062
December 1998	141,051	114,165	104,034	183,880	132,574	187,032	199,645	111,217	1,173,598
January 1999	139,347	113,825	104,406	183,452	130,769	183,990	194,341	109,238	1,159,368
February 1999	134,787	110,522	99,226	177,445	126,057	176,238	188,695	106,700	1,119,670
March 1999	128,527	106,552	93,581	171,694	119,889	167,783	181,122	103,712	1,072,860
April 1999	133,013	106,546	95,448	173,838	121,915	169,967	185,479	106,388	1,092,594
May 1999	133,017	107,342	95,830	174,515	122,842	170,096	186,181	106,274	1,096,097
June 1999	134,650	106,851	96,056	174,323	121,546	169,894	184,120	106,811	1,094,251
July 1999	133,766	105,446	96,109	173,900	120,784	168,529	185,715	107,286	1,091,535
August 1999	134,255	104,082	96,053	174,517	118,860	167,887	185,271	107,944	1,088,869
September 1999	133,343	103,763	97,204	173,255	118,517	167,338	184,587	106,522	1,084,529
October 1999	133,301	102,720	96,141	171,980	118,269	167,078	184,378	105,581	1,079,448

Respiratory Illnesses

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans are in place to cope with a possible increase in respiratory-associated illnesses in elderly people this winter. [104165]

Mr. Hutton: Local Winter Planning Groups (LWPG) were established in April 1999 to co-ordinate the planning and provision of health and social care services over the winter and the millennium. Each LWPG includes health authorities, social services, National Health Service trusts, primary care groups, out-of-hours and deputising services, NHS Direct, police and fire services, the voluntary and private sector, community health councils and other local authority departments.

As part of the planning process LWPG's were required to submit robust plans at the end of September 1999 setting out how services would respond to increased winter demand including that linked to respiratory-associated illnesses. The plans, which were assessed by the NHS regional offices, together with visits to a number of health authorities, showed a high state of readiness for the winter.

Many viruses contribute to respiratory-associated illness in older people in the winter and influenza is the only one we have an effective vaccine against. In 1998, we extended the annual immunisation programme for influenza to offer free flu vaccine to everyone aged 75 and over. Flu immunisation was well publicised. The Chief Medical Officer launched "Flu Awareness Week" at a press conference in October which resulted in widespread media coverage and provided a useful opportunity to get key messages across. Many health authorities also took an active role in promoting flu immunisation locally last year.

Also, as part of planning for this winter, NHS Trust have arrangements in place to provide more intensive care and high dependency beds than ever before.

Informing the public of the range of healthcare options available and encouraging them to use the appropriate service has also been a key component of planning for the winter. General campaigns of particular relevance to older people have been: "Keep Warm, Keep Well" which provides advice to older and other vulnerable people on how to keep themselves and their homes warm in winter and "Choose the Right Remedy this Winter" which encourages the public to consider all the options open to them when they are unwell such as self care, pharmacy, and NHS Direct.

The NHS and local authorities have planned well for this winter and the current peaks in demand are being managed.

Transplants

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) in the last year for which figures are available, how many people in each NHS region who have received heart transplants are aged *(a)* under 29, *(b)* 30 to 49, *(c)* 50 to 59, *(d)* 60 to 74 and *(e)* 75 years and over; [103953]

(2) how many people in each NHS region who have received renal transplants in the last year for which figures are available are aged *(a)* under 29, *(b)* 30 to 49, *(c)* 50 to 64, *(d)* 65 to 74, *(e)* 75 to 84 and *(f)* 85 years and over; [103949]

(3) in the last year for which figures are available, how many people in each NHS region who are waiting for renal transplants are aged *(a)* under 29, *(b)* 30 to 49, *(c)* 50 to 64, *(d)* 65 to 74, *(e)* 75 to 84 and *(f)* 85 years and over; [103954]

(4) in the last year for which figures are available, how many people in each NHS region who are waiting for heart transplants are aged *(a)* under 29, *(b)* 30 to 49, *(c)* 50 to 59, *(d)* 60 to 74 and *(e)* 75 years and over. [103952]

Mr. Denham: The information requested on the questions has been placed in the Library.

Neurology Treatment

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to provide additional funding to treat people with neurological conditions; and if he will make a statement. [104581]

Mr. Hutton: There are no plans to provide additional funding over and above the extra resources currently being provided to the National Health Service to treat people with neurological conditions.

Under the present system it is, of course, for health authorities and primary care groups to plan and arrange the services to people in their care. They are closest to the patients and best placed to respond sensitively to their needs.

National Beds Inquiry

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish the findings of the National Beds Inquiry; and if he will make a statement. [105064]

Mr. Denham: The National Beds Inquiry is nearing completion. Its findings will be published shortly.

Bed Occupancy

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent guidance he has given to health authorities concerning bed occupancy rates in NHS hospitals. [104900]

Ms Stuart: No specific guidance has been issued. However, an analysis of the research into the relationship between bed occupancy and the management of elective and emergency pressures was set out in the first report of the Emergency Services Action Team in 1997, and referred to in subsequent ESAT reports. The report was published under cover of an Executive Letter (MISC 97/62), which followed the guidance on Access to Secondary Care Services set out in Executive Letter (EL97/42). Copies of the reports and both ELs are in the Library.

Mental Health

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if paragraph 30 of the Local Government Ombudsman's report 98/B/0341 setting out the Department's view in March 1997 on section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983 still represents the Department's view; [104988]

(2) if he will list the local authorities that charge for residential services under section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983; [104986]

(3) from what date he determined that local authorities should not charge for residential services under section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983. [104987]

Mr. Hutton: There are no provisions in the Mental Health Act 1983 to charge for after-care services provided under section 117. The Act does not specify which services should be provided for a patient who qualifies for after-care under section 117. In the absence of case law on this subject before the High Court's ruling on 28 July 1999, there has been variation in practice between local authorities on the issue of whether residential care provided for patients who qualify for after-care under section 117 was considered to be provided under section 117 or under other statutes.

The Department has not issued formal guidance on this issue but advice in response to questions on this point has consistently been that, where residential care is provided as part of a package of services under section 117, then it should not be charged for. This is in line with paragraph 30 of the Local Ombudsman's report 98/B/0341 in so far as it deals with not charging for section 117 after-care services. The Department does not have information about which local authorities currently charge for such services.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate what savings there would be to public funds if those entitled to free residential care under section 117 of the Mental Health Act 1983 *(a)* were disallowed from receiving income support residential allowance and *(b)* had their benefit income reduced by other means. [104985]

Mr. Bayley: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested is not available. The Department does not collect information on the specific legislation under which placements in residential care or nursing home are made.

Internet (Medicinal Drug Sales)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what initiatives his Department has taken *(a)* unilaterally and *(b)* in partnership with other members of the EU to prevent problems arising from the unrestricted sale of medicinal drugs on the Internet. [104825]

Ms Stuart: The Medicine Control Agency investigates cases referred to it of alleged breaches of medicines legislation arising from the internet. It works closely with the European Union and international regulatory and enforcement bodies and will continue to do so. The European Commission has established a group to consider the impact of e-commerce in pharmaceuticals on the existing safeguards to patients. The United Kingdom will be playing an active role in its deliberations.

NHS Beds

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many beds were available for patient care in the NHS on 1 May in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998 and *(c)* 1999; and how many of these were acute beds. [105636]

Ms Stuart: The average daily number of available beds is published annually in "Bed Availability and Occupancy, England", copies of which are in the Library. The latest information is for 1997–98.

NHS Manpower

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many staff were employed directly by the NHS in *(a)* medical positions, *(b)* administrative positions and *(c)* in total, as at (i) 1 January 1997 and (ii) 1 January 2000. [105213]

Mr. Denham: Information about numbers of staff employed directly by the National Health Service is not collected in January of each year. Information about numbers of staff employed directly by the National Health Service on 30 September in the last three years for which data are available is shown in the table.

NHS hospital and community health services: all directly employed staff in England as at 30 September for each year

Whole-time equivalents

	1996	*1997*	*1998*
All directly employed staff	761,240	758,060	765,950
Medical staff	51,780	54,640	56,270
Administration and estates staff	167,430	166,960	167,700
Other	542,030	536,460	541,970

Notes:
Figures are rounded to the nearest 10
Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts
Sources:
Department of Health Non-Medical Workforce Census

Nursing Homes

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health under what circumstances people who, through ill health, require nursing care have to pay for accommodation in nursing homes. [105565]

Mr. Hutton: Guidance issued by the Department to health authorities in 1995 set out a national framework against which health authorities, in consultation with local authorities, were required to review their existing arrangements for continuing health care and to draw up local policies and eligibility criteria for individual case decisions about the need for National Health Service funded care. This includes the range, location and level of services which will be arranged and funded by the NHS to meet continuing health care needs in their area.

We are currently reviewing continuing care policy with a view to issuing revised guidance later this year.

Local authority social services have always had a very important role in supporting people, either in their own homes or in residential care. Where a person is provided with nursing home or residential care accommodation by a local authority under Part III of the National Assistance Act 1948, section 22 of that Act provides for them to be charged for the accommodation.

The Royal Commission on Long-Term Care recommended changes to the charging system. Decisions on the system of funding long-term care will be taken as part of the current spending review.

Myxoedema

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what training is given to student doctors in diagnosing myxoedema; what treatment is recommended for this disease; and if he will make a statement. [105290]

Mr. Denham: Responsibility for the content and standards of medical education is shared between the regulatory bodies (eg The General Medical Council and Specialist Training Authority), professional bodies (notably the medical Royal Colleges) and universities. It is neither practicable nor desirable for the Government to prescribe the exact training that any individual doctor will receive.

The recommended maintenance treatment for myxoedema is replacement thyroid hormone. Thyroxine sodium tablets is the normal maintenance therapy but in severe cases Liothyronine sodium tablets or injection may be used for a rapid response.

SOCIAL SECURITY

State Second Pension

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people he estimates will receive the state second pension *(a)* when it is introduced and *(b)* at each five year interval following its introduction over the next 20 years. [104092]

Mr. Rooker: In the first year of introduction, no one will receive payment of State Second Pension, although individuals will begin to accrue entitlement to it.

It is not possible to provide precise estimates of the number of individuals who will receive State Second Pension for specific years following its introduction.

The following table shows very broad brush estimates of the numbers who will benefit from State Second Pension. These are subject to uncertainty and possible subsequent revision.

Numbers benefiting from State Second Pension at the end of the financial year

Year	*Million*
2003–04	0.3
2008–09	2.1
2013–14	4.0
2018–19	5.5
2023–24	7.5

Notes:

1. The numbers given are the estimated numbers of individuals who will benefit from State Second Pension at the *end* of each year. For example, with the first year of awards being 2003–04, the entry in the table headed 2003–04 shows the number of beneficiaries after the first full year of awards.

2. Numbers for 2003–04 and 2008–09 have been rounded to the nearest 0.1 million. Numbers for later years are rounded to the nearest 0.5 million.

3. Figures include people who would receive State Second Pension payments as well as those receiving contracted-out pensions where they have benefited from higher contracted-out rebates than would have applied under SERPS.

4. The figures exclude those higher earning individuals who are contracted-out and whose rebates would be the same under State Second Pension as under SERPS, since such individuals would not benefit from awards of State Second Pension, nor would they gain from any increase in contracted-out rebates.

Departmental Statistics

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the publication dates of statistics to be released by his Department and agencies in this calendar year. [104599]

Mr. Rooker: The information in the table relates to statistics published by the Department under the Government Statistical Service banner.

Although many of the dates are provisional at this stage, final release dates will be notified in the Office National Statistics Update in the month prior to the publication. This is in line with DSS release practice.

Title	*Period of issue*	*Period ending*	*Date of release*
Imminent publications			
Cross Benefit Analysis Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of working age on key benefits	Quarterly	May 1999	13 January 2000
Abstract of Statistics for Social Security Benefits and indices of prices and earnings	Annual	April 1999	27 January 2000
Cross Benefit Analysis for Pensioners of the Population over State Retirement Age	Bi-annual	May 1998	27 January 2000
Pensioners Income Series 1997–98	Annual	1997–98	27 January 2000
Statistical summary	Quarterly	December 1999	27 January 2000
Tax Benefit Model Tables	Annual	June 1999	27 January 2000
Provisional publication dates			
Child's Special Allowance	Annual	December 1999	February 2000
Housing Benefit Summary Statistics	Quarterly	May 1999	February 2000
Retirement Pensions Summary of Statistics	Bi-annual	September 1999	February 2000
Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	November 1999	10 February 2000
Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Invalid Care Allowance	Quarterly	August 1999	17 February 2000
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Inquiry	Quarterly	November 1999	24 February 2000
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit—quarterly summary of statistics on new claims (accidents and prescribed diseases) and first diagnoses (prescribed diseases only)	Quarterly	September 1999	24 February 2000
Jobseekers allowance statistics—quarterly inquiry	Quarterly	November 1999	31 March 2000
Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance quarterly summary of statistics	Quarterly	November 1999	31 March 2000
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and Reduced Earnings	Annual	1997–98	31 March 2000
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit—quarterly summary of statistics on new claims (accidents and prescribed diseases) and first diagnoses (prescribed diseases only)	Quarterly	December 1999	17 April 2000
Statistical summary	Quarterly	—	27 April 2000
Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	May 2000	12 May 2000
Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Invalid Care Allowance	Quarterly	November 1999	18 May 2000
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Inquiry	Quarterly	February 2000	25 May 2000
Jobseekers Allowance statistics—quarterly inquiry	Quarterly	February 2000	8 June 2000
Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance quarterly summary of statistics	Quarterly	February 2000	30 June 2000
Family Resources Survey report	Annual	1998–99	July 2000
Industrial injuries disablement benefit—quarterly summary of statistics on new claims (accidents and prescribed diseases) and first diagnoses (prescribed diseases only)	Quarterly	March 2000	17 July 2000
Statistical summary	Quarterly	—	27 July 2000
Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	August 2000	17 August 2000
Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Invalid Care Allowance	Quarterly	February 2000	17 August 2000
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Inquiry	Quarterly	May 2000	24 August 2000
Jobseekers Allowance statistics—quarterly inquiry	Quarterly	May 2000	14 September 2000
Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance quarterly summary of statistics	Quarterly	May 2000	29 September 2000
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit—quarterly summary of statistics on new claims (accidents and prescribed diseases) and first diagnoses (prescribed diseases only)	Quarterly	June 2000	17 October 2000
Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary of Statistics	Quarterly	August 2000	16 November 2000
Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Invalid Care Allowance	Quarterly	May 2000	16 November 2000
Provisional Publication Dates			
Income Support Quarterly Statistical Inquiry	Quarterly	August 2000	23 November 2000
Jobseekers Allowance statistics—quarterly inquiry	Quarterly	August 2000	14 December 2000
Incapacity Benefit and Severe Disablement Allowance quarterly summary of statistics	Quarterly	August 2000	15 December 2000
Fraud and error in Income Support and JSA	Annual	1998–99	28 January 2000
Release date to be determined			
Housing Benefit Summary Statistics	Quarterly	August 1999	Yet to be determined
Housing Benefit Summary Statistics	Quarterly	November 1999	Yet to be determined
Take-up of Income Related Benefits	Annual	1998–99	Yet to be determined (Summer 2000)
Appeals Service Adjudication Statistics	Quarterly	December 1999	Yet to be determined
Disability Working Allowance Quarterly Inquiry	Quarterly	October 1999	Yet to be determined
Disability Working Allowance Quarterly Inquiry	Quarterly	January 2000	Yet to be determined
Family Credit Statistics—Quarterly Inquiry	Quarterly	November 1999	Yet to be determined
Family Credit Statistics—Quarterly Inquiry	Quarterly	February 2000	Yet to be determined
Cross Benefit Analysis Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of working age on key	Quarterly	August 1999	Yet to be determined

Title	Period of issue	Period ending	Date of release
benefits			
Cross Benefit Analysis Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of working age on key benefits	Quarterly	November 1999	Yet to be determined
Cross Benefit Analysis Quarterly Bulletin on the Population of working age on key benefits	Quarterly	February 2000	Yet to be determined
Cross Benefit Analysis for Pensioners of the Population over State Retirement Age	Tri-annual	May 1999	Yet to be determined
Cross Benefit Analysis for Pensioners of the Population over State Retirement Age	Tri-annual	November 1999	Yet to be determined
Households below average Income Statistics	Annual	1994–95 1998–99	Yet to be determined (Summer 2000)

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (Mrs. Heal) on 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 5, if he will estimate *(a)* how many people will benefit and *(b)* what the cost will be of extending eligibility to Attendance Allowance and Disability Living Allowance to people who pay the full cost of their care in local authority care homes; and if he will provide a breakdown of people in local authority care homes by (i) age and (ii) who is paying the cost of their care. [105074]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Estimated cost of extending DLA Care/AA eligibility to self-financiers in local authority owned/managed residential care homes

	Estimated number of gainers	Estimated additional benefit expenditure £ million
2000–01	2,000	4
2001–02	2,000	4
2002–03	2,000	4

Note:
The estimated costs and numbers of gainers are approximate and subject to a large margin of error given the limitations of the available data

Breakdown by age of local authority care home residents

Age	Number of residents
Under age 65	10,783
65–74	6,460
75–84	19,482
85+	27,284

Notes:
1. Provided by Department of Health annual return RAC5. Relates to 1996 which is the last year for which data collected. Relates to England only.
2. 61,943 residents of local authority staffed homes were supported by a local authority, but it is not known how the remaining 2,066 residents funded their care fees[1].

Source:
[1] Information provided by Department of Health return SR1 relates to 1996, this being the last year for which data was collected. Relates to England only.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost in 1999–2000 of *(a)* administration and *(b)* publicity for the winter fuel payments scheme. [104686]

Angela Eagle: The administration costs for making winter fuel payments this winter (1999–2000) were in the region of £14 million.

To ensure that pensioners were not worried about turning up their heating this winter it was necessary to inform them of the increase in the amount of the payments and to remind them that they were on their way. This required a major publicity campaign—the costs of which were in the region of £620,000.

Industrial Injuries Benefit

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to change the system whereby Income Support is recovered from recipients of Industrial Injuries Benefit. [104840]

Mr. Bayley: There are no plans to change the system of recovering amounts of Income Support paid pending the payment of other benefits, such as Industrial Injuries Benefit.

Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will place in the Library a copy of the legal advice he received that clause 49 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights under the Human Rights Act 1998; [104991]

(2) if he will set out the basis for his statement that clause 49 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill is compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights under the Human Rights Act 1998. [104990]

Angela Eagle: The proposals in clause 49 are compatible with UK obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights. In arriving at this conclusion we have considered a number of issues, which are discussed below.

The obligations under Article 6 of the Convention (the right to a fair trial) are complied with as those affected by this measure will have a right of appeal to an independent tribunal in respect of the decision to withdraw or reduce benefits and the magistrates or Crown Court will establish the facts of the alleged breach, as now.

Article 7 (no punishment without law) does not arise as the measure (even if it was regarded as criminal in nature) will only apply to those given community sentences after this Bill has become law and been commenced. There will be no retrospection.

Although the exchange of information between the Probation Service and the Benefits Agency may raise issues under Article 8, on privacy, the exchange proposed is the minimum necessary to achieve the legitimate aims of matching benefit rights to responsibilities.

In considering any question in relation to Article 14 (prohibition of discrimination) these proposals are to be seen as part of the reform of the welfare state on the basis of a contract between the citizen and the state, whereby rights to benefits and responsibilities to society are more closely linked. Our concern is not only to achieve better compliance with community sentences, but to reflect the view that it is not fair that offenders who breach community sentences should have the same rights to benefits as those who comply. People who do comply would not lose financially, nor would those who claim no rights to benefits. Benefits are conditional on the fulfilment of responsibilities to society. It therefore does not breach Article 14 by any unjustified different treatment of those on benefits compared with others. Any different treatment as may arise is justified as it has an objective aim that is in the public interest, as set out above.

Article 1 of the First Protocol (protection of property) does not apply to all Social Security benefits, although contributory Jobseeker's Allowance may be regarded as a "possession" for the purposes of this Article. This proposal to withdraw benefit in these limited and specified circumstances is justifiable as it is in the public interest, striking a fair balance between the interests of the community and those of the individual, and will be provided for by law.

The advice tendered by our legal advisers is internal policy advice and is not normally disclosed under Exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Debt Recovery

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress he has made in developing the Debt Accounting and Management System for debt recovery; and when he expects the system to be operational. [104659]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Frank Field, dated 17 January 2000:

I am replying to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what progress the Benefits Agency has made in developing the Debt Accounting and Management system; and when we expect it to be operational.

The Debt Accounting and Management system was intended to provide a means of accounting for and assisting in the control and management of benefit overpayment debt.

Development of the solution was based on a commercially available software package. Once work was underway, it became clear that because of the complex nature of BA business processes that this would not be feasible as originally envisaged. It was agreed that it would be more appropriate to incorporate this into the wider work being carried out as part of the Departmental Modernisation Programme.

The decision not to proceed with DAMS resulted in the need for a different solution to the difficulties surrounding benefit debt accounting and management.

The Strategic Debt Solution Project was initiated to draw on the knowledge gained from DAMS and to provide a set of solutions that would allow the BA to progress to a strategic solution that supports a wider debt management requirement.

The aim of the Strategic Debt Solution [SDS] Project is underpinned by six high level objectives:

1. Over the lifetime of the solution, to contribute towards meeting Resource Accounting and Budgeting [RAB] requirements by making stepped improvements
2. To report Benefit debt balances as accurately as possible, in the absence of an integrated end to end debt management and accounting system
3. To implement, maintain and monitor a range of internal controls within the debt management process
4. To identify a strategic solution for debt management and accounting working in conjunction with the Departmental Modernisation Programme
5. To raise the profile of debt management and improve debt management capability
6. To optimise the investment to date and any future spend

An Options Appraisal is currently being carried out in order to identify the solution that most effectively meets these aims and objectives. The Options Appraisal involves identifying and confirming:

The weaknesses of the current debt management and accounting processes and systems

The high level requirements for improved processes and systems

The various options available for meeting these requirements

The completion of the Options Appraisal is planned for April 2000. The detailed requirements for the preferred option will then be developed in a Full Study, which will be completed by August 2000.

I hope this is helpful.

Girocheques

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the provisions which allow a benefit recipient to sign the reverse of their giro to authorise another person to collect their benefit from a post office will continue once the transfer to benefit payment by automated credit transfer is complete. [105568]

Mr. Rooker: Arrangements currently exist for customers paid by girocheque and order book who are unable to attend the post office, that ensure customers can access their benefit. Similarly arrangements also exist for customers currently paid by automated credit transfer (ACT) who are unable to attend the bank or building society.

Arrangements ensuring that all customers who are unable to attend the post office or bank can access their benefit, will continue once the transfer to payment by ACT is complete.

Income Support

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when his campaign to encourage the take-up of income support by pensioners will begin. [104914]

Mr. Rooker: An announcement of our plans to encourage pensioners to take-up their entitlement to the minimum income guarantee will be made shortly.

Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps his Department has taken in the past year to ensure that appraisal of the performance of staff working for the Department's agencies takes account of anti-fraud work. [105567]

Mr. Rooker: Each Agency currently has its own appraisal system to reflect differing business needs, but each has a system on which staff are assessed annually across a range of objectives and competencies, including anti-fraud activity. All staff in the Department has a role to play in the fight against fraud. The Department is currently reviewing staff performance appraisal and will be seeking to further strengthen the role between individual performance and the drive to reduce fraud.

Benefit Rules

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his Department's examination of benefit rules to see if they contribute to fraud and error as detailed in section 2.13 of the White Paper, Safeguarding Social Security. [105566]

Mr. Rooker: The examination of the rule whereby a couple who declare they are living together receive less benefit than 2 people who purport to live separately is still under way.

The other rules are being reviewed as part of wider welfare reform work.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total public expenditure on housing benefit in each of the past 10 years in respect of *(a)* private and *(b)* public rented housing. [105231]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

£ million

	Rent allowances	*Rent rebates*	*Total housing benefit*
1989–90	1,359	2,941	4,299
1990–91	1,779	3,368	5,147
1991–92	2,426	4,068	6,494
1992–93	3,284	4,593	7,877
1993–94	4,195	5,019	9,214
1994–95	4,883	5,229	10,112
1995–96	5,455	5,431	10,886
1996–97	5,810	5,569	11,380
1997–98	5,682	5,498	11,180
1998–99	5,667	5,405	11,072

Notes:
1. Sum of DSS-funded and additional Local Authority expenditure.
2. Figures for 1989–90 to 1996–97—source: table 8 of Social Security Departmental Report 1999 (Cm 4214) and earlier equivalents. Figures for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are estimated outturn.
3. Figures may not sum due to rounding.

WALES

Petrol Prices

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the continued rise in petrol prices in rural Wales. [105569]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I met my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss a range of issues. As part of his pre-Budget Report late last year, he announced that the fuel duty escalator would be scrapped, which means that in future there will no longer be automatic rises in fuel prices but the appropriate level of fuel duties will be set on a Budget by Budget basis. Revenues from any increases in fuel duties over and above inflation will go straight to a ring-fenced fund for improving public transport and improving the road network.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 19 January 2000

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Further and Higher Education

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he is taking to improve the pay and conditions of teaching staff in *(a)* colleges of further education and *(b)* universities. [105143]

Mr. Wicks: The pay and conditions of staff in further education colleges and higher education institutions are matters for employers and staff. The Government are investing heavily in both sectors and announced in November 1999 increases of £365 million for further education and £295 million for higher education for 2001–02.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will appoint an ombudsman for further and higher education. [105480]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend has no plans to establish an Ombudsman for further and higher education.

School Standards

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how standards are being raised in areas not in education action zones. [105601]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government are committed to creating a world-class education service. We have made it clear that raising standards is our top priority and are taking practical steps to help schools, teachers and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to improve. To back up this pledge, the Government have provided an additional £19 billion for education over the three years 1999–2000 to 2001–02.

New initiatives are being put in place to raise standards in schools and LEAs all across the country. The literacy and numeracy strategies and their stretching targets for 2002 are at the forefront of the nationwide drive to improve standards. Other initiatives include Sure Start for early years, Education Development Plans (EDPs) for LEAs, Excellence in Cities, and the expansion of the number of Specialist and Beacon schools. Both Schools and LEAs are also subject to regular inspections by OFSTED. Success is now being rewarded and failure tackled. We also recognise that teachers are of central importance in the drive to raise standards. We have committed up to a billion pounds over the next two years in modernisation measures aimed at increasing teacher professionalism and morale.

Standards are beginning to rise. In 1997, 57 per cent. of 11-year-olds achieved the standard for their age in English and 54 per cent. the standard for maths. In 1999, this rose to 70 per cent. in English and 69 per cent. in maths. We are well on track to meet the 2002 targets of 80 per cent. in English and 75 per cent. in maths.

Local Education Authority Administration Costs

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 148W, on local education authority administration costs, if he will update his reply for the financial year 1998–99. [105671]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is not yet available. I will write to my hon. Friend when I am able to reply, and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library.

Departmental Smoking Policy

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to reduce smoking in his Department. [105804]

Mr. Wills: The Department for Education and Employment has smoking policies in place which provide a non-smoking working environment. Smoking is restricted to specially designated areas, such as smoking rooms. Literature on giving up smoking is available in our training centres, and DfEE HQ sites have in the past offered further support for staff wishing to give up smoking through a number of health promotion events.

School Governors

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many school governor vacancies there are in each local education authority area; and if he will make a statement. [105530]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department does not routinely collect information about school governor vacancies, but is aware from recent and current research that the level of vacancies is higher than desirable.

School governors have a valuable part to play in raising standards in our schools. The new framework for schools has increased the number of governors to approximately 360,000 (compared with 300,000) previously. Finding governors is a local matter, for schools, local education authorities and other appointing bodies. The Department recognises the need to recruit more school governors and is active in supporting local efforts. In particular, the School Governors' One Stop Shop, supported by the Department, is now recruiting governors with business and management skills in the inner city areas covered by the Government's Excellence in Cities initiative. In addition, the Department has produced general recruitment materials, developed with local education authority (LEA) advice, as well as a leaflet produced jointly with the National Governors Council (NGC) which encourages people from ethnic minorities to become governors. The Department is also following up recommendations of the Education and Employment Committee report on the role of school governors,

including guidance to encourage LEAs to fill their governor vacancies according to the contribution people can make rather than their political affiliation and to collect information about governor vacancies and make it available.

New Deal (North-West)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will give the destination of those who have left the New Deal for 18–24 year olds *(a)* at the time at which they left the New Deal, *(b)* 13 weeks after leaving the New Deal and *(c)* 26 weeks after leaving the New Deal, for each parliamentary constituency in the (i) City of Liverpool and (ii) Wirral. [104615]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* The following table summarises the immediate destinations of young people who leave the New Deal in each of the constituencies named. In addition to those recorded as leaving for unsubsidised employment, we know that many of those recorded as leaving for unknown destinations will have found work without notifying the Employment Service. A recent survey found that of those leaving for unknown destinations from the Gateway stage of New Deal, 57 per cent. entered paid employment.

We do not hold information on the destinations of young people 13 and 26 weeks after leaving New Deal. Our figures for sustained jobs cover those who leave for a job and do not return to claim JSA within 13 weeks.

Immediate destination on leaving New Deal: cumulative to end October 1999

	Sustained unsubsidised jobs	*Other benefits*	*Other known destination*	*Unknown destination*
Liverpool Garston	254	92	97	141
Liverpool Riverside	429	232	258	410
Liverpool Walton	430	166	173	330
Liverpool Wavertree	343	119	226	277
Liverpool West Derby	400	147	182	279
Southport	168	22	40	70
Crosby	165	32	67	80
Bootle	424	142	142	224
Knowsley North and Sefton East	386	171	135	236
St. Helens North	228	81	93	120
St. Helens South	278	118	89	150
Knowsley South	418	183	170	264
Birkenhead	457	157	261	324
Wallasey	328	120	196	203
Wirral South	194	35	57	143
Wirral West	223	31	99	127

LEA Administrative Costs

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 11 January 2000 to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), *Official Report*, columns 148–52W, concerning local education authority administrative costs, if he will publish on a cost per pupil basis the expenditure on administration for each local education authority listed. [105300]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table gives for each local education authority in England information on administration expenditure, encompassing central management and administration, and service, strategy and regulation costs, in the form of costs per pupil for the financial year 1997–98.

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA name	*Expenditure on central management administration and service strategy and regulation costs per pupil*	*Total education expenditure cost per pupil*
London, City of	3,168	15,074
Camden	304	4,296
Greenwich	237	3,406
Hackney	319	4,347
Hammersmith and Fulham	246	4,507
Islington	217	4,025
Kensington and Chelsea	271	5,722
Lambeth	40	5,243

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA name	*Expenditure on central management administration and service strategy and regulation costs per pupil*	*Total education expenditure cost per pupil*
Lewisham	166	3,828
Southwark	233	4,145
Tower Hamlets	253	3,936
Wandsworth	207	4,402
Westminster, City of	297	4,576
Barking and Dagenham	138	3,002
Barnet	117	3,450
Bexley	145	2,551
Brent	131	4,051
Bromley	200	3,144
Croydon	99	3,218
Ealing	202	3,434
Enfield	179	3,125
Haringey	109	3,678
Harrow	126	3,308
Havering	82	2,619
Hillingdon	188	3,142
Hounslow	121	3,129
Kingston upon Thames	125	3,024
Merton	171	3,142
Newham	99	3,160
Redbridge	69	2,999
Richmond upon Thames	120	3,189
Sutton	206	3,181
Waltham Forest	249	3,419
Birmingham	83	2,988
Coventry	50	2,974

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA name	*Expenditure on central management administration and service strategy and regulation costs per pupil*	*Total education expenditure cost per pupil*
Dudley	70	2,501
Sandwell	86	2,716
Solihull	84	2,485
Walsall	58	2,726
Wolverhampton	90	2,909
Knowsley	126	2,607
Liverpool	111	2,836
St. Helens	85	2,659
Sefton	77	2,742
Wirral	104	2,680
Bolton	77	2,592
Bury	76	2,537
Manchester	104	2,917
Oldham	57	2,577
Rochdale	97	2,704
Salford	188	2,777
Stockport	80	2,489
Tameside	84	2,461
Trafford	68	2,649
Wigan	81	2,532
Barnsley	75	2,495
Doncaster	70	2,663
Rotherham	81	2,446
Sheffield	93	2,678
Bradford	82	2,724
Calderdale	125	2,747
Kirklees	104	2,611
Leeds	84	2,673
Wakefield	96	2,403
Gateshead	146	2,877
Newcastle upon Tyne	130	3,115
North Tyneside	40	2,592
South Tyneside	125	2,612
Sunderland	45	2,477
Isles of Scilly	184	5,038
Bath and North East Somerset	117	2,847
Bristol, City of	145	2,945
North Somerset	130	2,787
South Gloucestershire	136	2,542
Hartlepool	116	2,431
Middlesbrough	116	2,576
Redcar and Cleveland	74	2,546
Stockton on Tees	80	2,429
Kingston upon Hull, City of	82	2,574
East Riding of Yorkshire	85	2,636
North East Lincolnshire	92	2,476
North Lincolnshire	208	2,734
North Yorkshire	81	2,661
York, City of	56	2,668
Bedfordshire	88	2,698
Luton	94	2,971
Buckinghamshire	160	2,885
Milton Keynes	191	2,661
Derbyshire	49	2,601
Derby City	84	2,656
Dorset	63	2,742
Poole	114	2,379
Bournemouth	147	2,790
Durham	95	2,621
Darlington	105	2,447
East Sussex	123	2,751
Brighton and Hove	140	2,925
Hampshire	87	2,728
Portsmouth	85	2,818
Southampton	37	2,812
Leicestershire	90	2,652
Leicester City	343	2,984
Rutland	153	3,418
Staffordshire	18	2,387
Stoke-on-Trent	90	2,471

Expenditure on administration by LEAs in England for financial year 1997–98

LEA name	*Expenditure on central management administration and service strategy and regulation costs per pupil*	*Total education expenditure cost per pupil*
Wiltshire	134	2,844
Swindon	64	2,442
Berkshire	83	2,652
Cambridgeshire	101	2,834
Cheshire	57	2,637
Cornwall	68	2,704
Cumbria	60	2,873
Devon	63	2,640
Essex	42	3,006
Gloucestershire	123	2,901
Hereford and Worcester	49	2,606
Hertfordshire	87	2,810
Isle of Wight	172	2,830
Kent	159	2,797
Lancashire	92	2,775
Lincolnshire	120	2,910
Norfolk	56	2,758
Northamptonshire	67	2,514
Northumberland	98	2,533
Nottinghamshire	106	2,662
Oxfordshire	104	2,756
Shropshire	61	2,748
Somerset	97	2,735
Suffolk	55	2,651
Surrey	109	2,922
Warwickshire	103	2,621
West Sussex	87	2,741
Total/Average	101	2,814

Further Education Colleges (Agency Staff)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent guidance he has issued to further education colleges on the use of agency staff; and what plans he has to evaluate the impact of the use of agency staff on *(a)* the quality, reliability and professional development of staff and *(b)* on student retention and achievement. [104848]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend has no plans to evaluate the use of agency staff in the further education sector. Further education colleges are independent and consequently the teaching, internal organisation and management are the responsibility of the college management.

Medical Students

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applicants for medical schools, in each of the last three years for which figures are available, were *(a)* accepted and *(b)* rejected; how many qualified; and how many took up positions in NHS hospitals. [104577]

Mr. Wicks: The available data for applicants in the three most recent years are given in the table. Not all those applicants who failed to obtain a place will necessarily have been rejected; some may have declined their offers, withdrawn from the scheme or opted for a year out.

Students applying for undergraduate medical courses in the UK via UCAS

Year of entry	Number of applicants	Number of applicants who were accepted
1997	12,025	4,894
1998	12,078	5,029
1999	11,807	5,119

Information showing the number of students who completed first degrees in medicine is given in the table. Data on the number of students taking up employment in NHS hospitals are not held centrally.

Students obtaining first degrees in medicine in the UK

Year	Number
1995–96	4,888
1996–97	5,072
1997–98	5,137

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed (i) in his predecessor Departments in 1979 and (ii) in his Department in 1999. [104016]

Mr. Wills: The number of men and women employed by the Department in each of the standard age groups is:

Age band	Male	Female	Total
60+	43	20	63
55–59	105	113	218
50–54	279	233	512
45–49	367	313	680
40–44	344	362	706
35–39	305	459	764
30–34	282	464	746
25–29	178	273	451
20–24	80	102	182
Under 20	6	16	22
Total	1989	2,355	4,344

There are no corresponding data available for 1979.

New Deal (Greater London)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of jobs that have been created in the Greater London area as a result of the New Deal. [104794]

Ms Jowell: New Deal is not a job creation scheme; rather it is designed to help unemployed people improve their skills and compete effectively for vacancies. The latest figures to the end of October 1999 show that this policy is working; over 21,000 young people, and 5,800 long term unemployed people aged 25 and over, have gained jobs through the New Deal in the Greater London area.

SATs

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children achieved one, two or three level 5s in last year's SATs; and how many achieved level 6 in each subject. [105561]

Mr. Wicks: The information requested is given in the following table. The answers were derived from a provisional matching of the 1999 National Curriculum Assessments at Key Stages 2 and 3.

Percentage

	Key Stage 2	Key Stage 3
Percentage of pupils who achieved at least Level 5 in all three of 1999 Key Stage tests:		
English, mathematics and science	11	43
Percentage of pupils who achieved at least Level 5 in only two of the three 1999 Key Stage tests:		
English and mathematics	3	7
English and science	3	3
Mathematics and science	5	5
Percentage of pupils who achieved at least Level 5 in only one of the three 1999 Key Stage tests:		
English	4	8
Mathematics	4	4
Science	7	2
The percentage of pupils who achieved at least Level 6 in 1999 Key Stage tests:		
English	[1]—	28
Mathematics	[1]—	38
Science	[1]—	24

[1] Indicates a figure below 0.5 per cent.

CABINET OFFICE

Investors in People

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress the Civil Service has made towards the target that all civil servants will be working in organisations recognised as Investors in People by the year 2000. [106129]

Mr. Stringer: Some 88 per cent. of Civil Servants now work in organisations recognised as Investors in People. This is a significant achievement by all concerned and Departments and Agencies should be congratulated on their progress. The Investors in People Standard is an important element of the Civil Service reform agenda and this achievement demonstrates the commitment of the Service. I would refer hon. Members to the report

"Investors in People in Government Departments and Agencies" which I have placed in the Libraries of the House.

Competitive Tendering

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is the number and value of contracts let by her Department since May 1997 to external consultants and advisers for the management of competitive tendering processes. [103607]

Mr. Stringer: Since May 1997, my Department has let 15 contracts with external consultants and advisers for the management of competitive tendering processes. The total value of those contracts is £601,694.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Clerks

Mr. Winnick: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, how many House of Commons Clerks have been appointed in the last five years, indicating the number and percentage broken down by *(a)* gender and *(b)* ethnic origin. [104532]

Mr. Kirkwood *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* Since the beginning of 1995, there have been 17 external recruits to the grade of Assistant Clerk and Senior Clerk, including faststream entrants, in the Department of the Clerk of the House. The table sets out the breakdown.

Year	*Number of Assistant and Senior Clerks recruited*	*Male*	*Female*
1995	2	0	2
1996	3	2	1
1997	4	2	2
1998	6	4	2
1999	2	1	1
Total	17	[1]9	[2]8

[1] 53 per cent.
[2] 47 per cent.

Approximately 80 per cent. of these recruits have declared their ethnic origin. All of those who did so are white.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Royal Ulster Constabulary

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for what reason the figures for compensation paid by the Police Authority indicated at the foot of claims against the Chief Constable were omitted from this year's Annual report; and if he will instruct the Police Authority to provide this information to all recipients of their annual report. [103822]

Mr. Ingram: A graph showing the amounts of compensation paid during 1998–99 was mistakenly omitted from the 1998–99 Police Authority Annual Report and not detected at final proof reading. This information will be provided to anyone requesting it and will be displayed on the Police Authority website at http://www.pani.org.uk.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will estimate the *(a)* cost of compensation and *(b)* legal costs incurred as a result of claims against the Chief Constable, including the costs of the Crown Solicitor's Office, in each year from 1985 to date. [103823]

Mr. Ingram: The information requested is not readily available prior to April 1997. The following table shows the compensation paid and the costs incurred from April 1997 to March 1999. Figures for the current financial year are not yet available.

£

	April 1997 to March 1998	*April 1998 to March 1999*
Damages paid	720,297	1,046,115
Plaintiffs Solicitors costs	529,829	619,885
Crown Solicitors costs	840,362	735,637
Crown Solicitors outlay	560,975	408,159

Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what written guidance on the Human Rights Act 1998 has been prepared by the Northern Ireland Office; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [103826]

Mr. George Howarth: No specific written guidance on the Human Rights Act has been prepared by the Northern Ireland Office. The various forms of guidance that have been produced by the Home Office and the Cabinet Office are adequate for staff in the Northern Ireland Office and its associated public bodies.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which individual in the Northern Ireland Office has been tasked with responsibility for implementing the Human Rights Act 1998. [103827]

Mr. George Howarth: It is not appropriate for me to name individual officers. The Human Rights Unit in the Northern Ireland Office is responsible for co-ordinating the Department's preparations for the implementation of the Act, under the direction of senior officials.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what arrangements have been made to prepare non-departmental public bodies for the impact of the Human Rights Act 1998. [103833]

Mr. George Howarth: The public authorities for which the Northern Ireland Office is responsible have been alerted to the requirements of the Act, and will be provided with appropriate training. An inter-departmental working group has been established to monitor progress being made by individual public bodies in preparing for the Act and to identify any issues on which a joint approach would be most effective.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what additional resources have been made available to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for consultation on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. [103835]

Mr. George Howarth: The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is defined as a non departmental public body and is funded by means of a grant in aid. The Commission's grant in aid for each of its first three years is £750,000. This figure represents the Government's considered judgment as to the amount of funding that would be needed in order to allow the Commission to discharge its functions effectively.

No additional resources have been made available to the Commission for its consultation exercise on the scope for defining a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. The Bill of Rights exercise has always been part of the Commission's remit as set out in statute. It was taken into account when the original grant in aid was determined and the Government therefore expect it to be funded within the allocated resources.

Equal Opportunities

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when he will lay the designation order specifying which additional public bodies are to be obliged to develop equality schemes in order to comply with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and which bodies external to the public service he consulted when determining which organisations to designate under the proposed designation order. [103813]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* In compiling the designation order, the Secretary of State consulted with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. This consultation raised a number of queries that are still receiving attention. When these have been resolved, the Secretary of State will be in a position to lay the designation order before Parliament.

Judges and Lawyers

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what action he took in response to the report of the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers, presented to the United Nations in 1998. [103819]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* My right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Marjorie Mowlam), then Secretary of State, met Mr. Param Cumaraswamy, UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers on 14 April 1999 to discuss the issues which he raised in his report presented to the United Nations in 1998. A copy of the statement that she issued afterwards is available in the Library.

The report called for an independent inquiry into the murder of Patrick Finucane. In February 1999 the Government took receipt of alleged new evidence into the murder. We undertook to consider this very carefully before deciding whether any further action was necessary. The DPP(NI) decided to ask the Chief Constable to look into the allegations and a further police inquiry was announced on 28 April into the murder and related issues. A person has been charged with Mr. Finucane's murder. We will be in a better position to decide what, if any, further action is needed when the police investigation and criminal proceedings have been completed.

Mr. Cumaraswamy refers in his report to the introduction of the new Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. On 11 October 1999, the Government announced the appointment of Mrs. Nuala O'Loan as Police Ombudsman Designate for Northern Ireland. The Ombudsman will have complete control over the Police Complaints system. She will be required to carry out independent investigations into serious complaints against the police. The Police Ombudsman has been appointed on a designate basis until the new office is established. This interim period will enable the Ombudsman Designate to have a direct say in the structure, staff and ethos of the office. This highlights the independence of the office.

The report also comments on audio/video recording in the holding centres. The police have a statutory Code of Practice which governs video recording and the detention, treatment, questioning and identification of terrorist suspects. A statutory Code of Practice on audio recording became mandatory on 24 May 1999. It is a disciplinary offence for a police officer to breach either of the Codes of Practice. Full audio recording and video recording of all interviews of persons in custody now takes place. The Chief Constable of the RUC has invited the Law Society to be involved in the training of Detective Officers who are involved in such interviews.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105312]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The information is as follows:

Property centre	*Property*	*Location*	*Wholly unoccupied*	*Mainly unoccupied*	*Date unoccupied from*
DETR(C)	Concord House	Paignton	Yes	—	February 1999
	Mullberry House	Edinburgh	Yes	—	March 1999
	Westpoint	Manchester	Yes	—	June 1999
	Highwood Pavilions	Bristol	Yes	—	April 1999
	Seymour House	Hemel Hempstead	Yes	—	July 1999
	Ogle Road	Southampton	Yes	—	May 1997
	St. Clare House	Ipswich	Yes	—	July 1997
	Caradog House	Cardiff	Yes	—	April 1997
Valuation Tribunals	Lynton House	Woking	Yes	—	November 1999
	34 St. Leonards Road	Eastbourne	Yes	—	November 1999
	100–102 Winchcombe Street	Cheltenham	Yes	—	December 1999
	Hamilton House	Chester	Yes	—	May 1999

Property centre	Property	Location	Wholly unoccupied	Mainly unoccupied	Date unoccupied from
Driving Standards Agency	Test Centres	Derby	Yes	—	1996
		Bilston	Yes	—	1996
		Kidderminster	—	Yes	1995
		Oswestry	—	Yes	1996
		Cardiff	—	Yes	1996
		Skipton	—	Yes	1996
		Harrogate	—	Yes	1996
		Sunderland	—	Yes	1996

Note:
The above refers to those areas solely the responsibility of the DETR or its agencies in the buildings referred to.

Powered Water Craft

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's policy in regulating the use of *(a)* jet-skis and *(b)* other powered water craft. [103179]

Mr. Meacher: The responsibility for the management of jet-skis and other powered watercraft is primarily for local authorities. Local byelaws, either inland or on the coast, give authorities the power to regulate such craft, for instance by imposing strict speed limits which result in the exclusion of many watercraft from specific areas. Speed limits already apply in some areas, such as parts of the Broads.

The Review of Byelaw Powers for the Coast recommended, among other things, that local authorities should be given a new power to create exclusive bathing zones and more general powers to regulate activities on the coast which affect the wider environment, such as the use of personal watercraft. We shall be looking for an opportunity to introduce legislation where it is needed to implement the Review's recommendations. In the meantime, we have published a voluntary code of best and safe practice for leisure craft users, and we are exploring options for a voluntary boat registration and identification scheme, which would include jet-skis.

Transport Supplementary Grant

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is offered as the level of transport supplementary grant for local authorities for 2000–01. [104229]

Mr. Prescott: £13.519 million in transport supplementary grant (TSG) has been allocated in the 2000–01 local transport capital settlement. This funding is given for a number of existing local authority major road scheme commitments.

In previous years TSG was used for the capital maintenance of bridges and principal road carriageways. From 2000–01 onwards this will now be funded exclusively in the form of borrowing approvals, for which local authorities receive revenue support grant (RSG) each year to meet the cost of repayment. The total allocation within the 2000–01 settlement for capital bridge and carriageway maintenance is £301 million, representing a 24 per cent. increase over 1999–2000.

Aircraft Crashes

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the latest estimate by the Civil Aviation Authority of the statistical probability in a year of a ground fatality occurring as a result of aircraft crashing on take-off or landing at *(a)* Heathrow, *(b)* Gatwick and *(c)* Stansted. [104634]

Mr. Mullin: The Civil Aviation Authority has identified two landing or take-off accidents within the United Kingdom during the last 40 years in which there were fatalities on the ground. These took place at Gatwick and Dunsfold and involved, respectively, two and six such fatalities. The Authority estimates that some 18.2 million aircraft movements took place at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted over the same period. Because of the very small number of accidents involving ground fatalities it is not possible to produce a statistically meaningful estimate for individual airports.

Gleneagles Hotel

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was realised by the sale of Gleneagles Hotel. [104830]

Mr. Hill: The Gleneagles Hotel, the Caledonian Hotel (Edinburgh) and the North British Hotel (Edinburgh) were sold together by the British Railways Board in 1981 by means of a company sale. Two thirds of the shares were sold for £13.5 million and the rest were sold later for £6.1 million.

Railways (Nottingham)

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* Railtrack and *(b)* Midland Mainline regarding the upgrading of the track between Nottingham and London. [104894]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend has had no discussions with Railtrack or Midland Main Line. However, I understand that Railtrack and Midland Main Line are currently discussing plans to improve the Midland Main Line.

Environment Agency

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to make a decision on the new charging regime proposed by the Environment Agency. [105079]

Mr. Meacher: The Environment Agency is currently consulting on its charging proposals for 2000–01. I expect to receive formal proposals from the Agency next month and to take decisions on them before the start of the new financial year.

Ports

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for changes in the law relating to ports. [105185]

Mr. Hill: We are considering options for legislation in respect of ports, including matters arising from both the Review of the Pilotage Act, published in July 1998 and from our Review of Trust Ports which has now produced the Guide to Good Governance that I launched earlier this month.

New Deal for Communities

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors were taken into account, other than indices for local deprivation, when deciding which London authorities would be invited to submit delivery plans for Round 2 of the New Deal for Communities. [105166]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In addition to information drawn from the Index of Local Deprivation, we applied a regional quota. That quota was used to balance our twin goals of spreading the impact of the new approach we are piloting under the New Deal for Communities as widely as possible, and focusing help and support on the areas of greatest need. On that basis, six of the 22 local authority districts eligible to participate in Round 2 are in London. The only other criteria we applied was that local authority areas in London eligible to participate in Round 1 of the programme, should not be eligible under Round 2.

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what factors will be taken into account when choosing which local authorities will be invited to submit delivery plans for Round 3 of the New Deal for Communities. [105165]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The targeting of regeneration funds, including those of the New Deal for Communities, will be considered in our cross cutting review of Government interventions in deprived areas and the forthcoming spending review.

Railways

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set minimum standards of facility provision at town centre railway stations in relation to *(a)* CCTV and *(b)* park and ride. [105547]

Mr. Hill: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 251W.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will investigate the extent of the availability of special offer tickets offered by rail companies. [105548]

Mr. Hill: APEX fares and other concessionary fares are not regulated by the Franchise Director and are offered by train companies at their discretion. We do not maintain records of unregulated fares which are on offer, but I understand that some train operators have reduced the number of concessions offered because of increased demand for services.

Crowe Report

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to respond to the Crowe report; and if he will make a statement. [105329]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to the letter my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning, sent on 23 November about the South East Regional Planning Guidance Panel Report. The principles that will underpin our consideration of the Panel's recommendations are set out in that letter. We hope to announce the changes we propose to the draft RPG, as put forward by SERPLAN, soon. Parliament will, of course, be informed.

Countryside Traffic Measures Group

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many times the Countryside Traffic Measures Group has met since July 1998. [105279]

Mr. Hill: I understand that the Countryside Agency's Countryside Traffic Measures Group has met on three occasions since 1998.

Eurostar

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the consultant's study into the viability of Eurostar services north of London; if he will publish the consultant's report; and when he will make a statement on the report. [105486]

Mr. Hill: The consultants' report is currently being considered by my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport, who will make a statement soon. The report will be published at the same time.

Transport Expenditure

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the level of public expenditure, in each of the last 10 years, in each EU member state, on *(a)* railways and *(b)* roads. [105188]

Mr. Hill: Details of public investment in British railways and roads in each of the 10 years 1988–89 to 1997–98 are shown in Table 1.16 of the Government Statistical Office's publication Transport Statistics Great Britain 1999 Edition. We do not have the requested information in relation to other EU member states.

Cruise Ships

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what regulations govern the practice of placing passengers' luggage in corridors outside cabins on cruise ships; and if he will make a statement. [105186]

Mr. Hill: In the case of a UK flag ship, there are general provisions in the Merchant, Shipping and Fishing (Health and Safety at Work) Regulations 1997 (SI 1997 No. 2962) about providing and maintaining a safe environment for persons aboard ship. There are also relevant provisions in the Merchant Shipping (Safe

Movement on Board Ship) Regulations 1988 (SI 1988 No. 1641); for example regulation 4 provides that "the employer and master shall ensure that safe means of access is provided and maintained to any place on the ship to which a person may be expected to go". Such provisions are enforceable on UK ships wherever they may be and could cover matters such as a safety hazard caused by luggage in corridors. In the case of a non-UK ship, the requirements will depend on the provisions in the regulations of the state where the ship is registered. As the UK requirements implement provisions contained in the International Labour Organisation Convention 147, they may also be enforced on a non-UK ship while in a UK port.

Railway Fatalities

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many railway passenger fatalities there were in each EU member state in the last 10 years. [105189]

Mr. Hill: Information about railway passenger fatalities is published by the European Commission in "Transport in Figures". The latest readily available information is as follows:

Number of passenger fatalities

	Persons killed in accidents involving railways		
	1990	*1995*	*1996*
Belgium	0	3	6
Denmark	1	0	0
Germany	50	34	35
Greece	0	3	0
Spain	4	0	0
France	30	22	14
Ireland	1	0	0
Italy	9	4	1
Luxembourg	0	0	0
Netherlands	2	0	1
Austria	6	7	3
Portugal	22	12	10
Finland	0	1	3
Sweden	3	2	0
Great Britain[1]	37	10	17

[1] Described as UK in 'Transport in Figures'

Source:
UIC (GB from national statistics)

These statistics are not necessarily based on common definitions and there is thus uncertainty about their comparability. The GB figures cover accidents on National Rail, London Underground and other urban railways, and included all passenger fatalities, both on trains and railway premises.

Street Lighting

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what statutory obligations local authorities have to provide street lighting. [105341]

Mr. Hill: Highway Authorities provide lighting under powers given by the Highways Act 1980. There are no statutory obligations for local authorities to provide street lighting.

Railtrack

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the *(a)* budgeted and *(b)* outturn investment by Railtrack in each year since its creation. [105703]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* Railtrack's budgets for investment are a commercial matter for the company.

The table provides details of Railtrack's outturn infrastructure expenditure in each financial year since 1996–97, when it was privatised.

Analysis of Railtrack infrastructure expenditure, 1996–97 to 1998–99

£ million cash prices

	1996–97	*1997–98*[1]	*1998–99*
Infrastructure maintenance	732	702	694
Expenditure on renewals	821	1,073	1,098
Backlog expenditure	28	63	92
Enhancement investment	170	208	294
Total infrastructure expenditure	1,751	2,046	2,178

[1] As restated in Railtrack's Annual Report and Accounts 1998–99

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Ms Southworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will announce which company has been chosen to operate the new voucher scheme for asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [106372]

Mrs. Roche: On 7 January, the Home Office awarded a contract for the operation of the new voucher scheme to Sodexho Pass International.

The voucher scheme will form an essential part of the new arrangements for supporting asylum seekers which were included in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 and will come into operation on 1 April 2000. The provision of vouchers supplemented by a small weekly cash allowance will enable asylum seekers to meet their essential living needs while reducing the incentive to economic migration inherent in a fully cash based system of support.

Data Protection

Ms Christine Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to lay the subordinate legislation to be made under the Data Protection Act 1998. [106373]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I intend to lay in draft next week the subordinate legislation subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. I shall publish on Thursday 20 January a draft of the Data Protection (Notification and Notification Fees) Regulations on the Internet at www.homeoffice.gov.uk and place copies in the Library. I intend to lay these Regulations and the other subordinate legislation subject to the negative resolution procedure in good time before the Data Protection Act 1998 comes into force on 1 March.

Contraband Tobacco

Mr. Barron: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many retailers were *(a)* arrested, *(b)* prosecuted and *(c)* convicted for selling contraband tobacco in each year since 1996. [104632]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Data on arrests are not collected centrally by individual offence.

The Home Office Court Proceedings Database does not hold information on the employment status of individuals or the characteristics of defendants who are not individuals. Nor does it hold information about the characteristics of individual cases apart from those that are evident from the description of the offence with which the defendant has been charged.

Retailers selling contraband tobacco can be prosecuted under section 170 of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 (either subsection (1) or (2); Common Law (cheating the revenue) and section 1 of the Criminal Law Act 1977 (conspiracy to evade excise duty). Such cases cannot be identified separately from the many other offences prosecuted under this legislation, which will include beer, wine and spirits, for example, as well as tobacco.

London Prisons

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many visitors to each of the London prisons were *(a)* charged with and *(b)* convicted of seeking to take illegal drugs into a prison in 1999. [104459]

Mr. Boateng: Figures for the number of visitors to London prisons who were charged with, or convicted of seeking to take illegal drugs into a prison in 1999 are not recorded by the Prison Service.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many inmates at each of the London prisons were put on a governor's report in 1999. [104463]

Mr. Boateng: Adjudication statistics refer to charges rather than individuals and the available information, for January to November 1999, is given in the table.

Number of adjudications (governor's reports) on offences against prison discipline, January to November 1999

Prison establishments in Greater London	*Number*
Belmarsh	1,430
Brixton	1,055
Downview	114
Feltham	1,832
High Down	1,081
Holloway	1,279
Latchmere House	93
Pentonville	1,220
Wandsworth	1,060
Wormwood Scrubs	744
Total	9,908

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many strip-searches of inmates took place in each of the London prisons in each of the last 12 months. [104462]

Mr. Boateng: Prisons are not required to maintain statistics of the number of strip searches carried out. Strip searching is an essential element in maintaining security and good order in prisons. It is not possible to record every occasion on which it takes place, as at present this would have to be done manually. This would pose an unacceptable administrative burden, achievable only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women were being held in London prisons for alleged immigration offences on 1 January. [104461]

Mr. Boateng: The available information is for 30 November 1999 and relates to the number of persons held in London prisons under the Immigration Act 1971. On that date, there were 59 males and 25 females held in London prisons under the Immigration Act 1971.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many inmates held in London prisons attempted *(a)* to commit suicide and *(b)* to cause self-inflicted injuries in 1999. [104460]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the table, which covers the period 1 April 1998 to 31 March 1999.

Establishment	*Incidents of self-harm financial year 1998–99*
Belmarsh	61
Brixton	186
Downview	1
Feltham	292
High Down	61
Holloway	250
Latchmere House	0
Pentonville	94
Wandsworth	305
Wormwood Scrubs	185

Notes:
1. These data are derived from information provided by establishments to the Directorate of Health Care.
2. Incidents do not equate to numbers of prisoners as an individual prisoner may self-harm more than once.
3. Statistics on self-harm are collected on a financial year basis.
4. The establishments listed are those in the Greater London area.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many inmates at each of the London prisons were charged with being in possession of illegal drugs while in prison in 1999. [104458]

Mr. Boateng: The number of offences of possession considered at adjudication is given in the table.

Number of adjudications on offences of possession of a controlled drug, January to November 1999

Prison establishments in Greater London	*Number of offences*[1]
Belmarsh	2
Brixton	18
Downview	1
Feltham	60
High Down	26
Holloway	4
Latchmere House	1
Pentonville	59
Wandsworth	6
Wormwood Scrubs	21

[1] Individual prisoners may be charged with more than one offence

Long-service Medals

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to equalise the length of service required to qualify for a police long-service medal with periods which apply in respect of the fire and ambulance services. [104502]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The respective qualifying periods for the long-service award—Police (22 years), Fire Service (20 years) and Ambulance Service (20 years) are directly related to conditions of employment. I am not aware of any suggestion by the Police Service that there should be any change to the qualifying period for their long-service medal. I have, therefore, no plans at present to make any such change.

Holocaust Denial Legislation

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce Holocaust denial legislation; and if he will make a statement. [104504]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Holocaust denial is a very difficult area in which to legislate. It is not easy to strike a balance between outlawing such offensive statements while ensuring that freedom of speech is not unduly restricted.

Therefore, while the Government are following carefully the current debates on this issue within the Jewish community and elsewhere, we have no immediate plan to introduce legislation.

Corporate Manslaughter

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consultations he has held on the question of legislation relating to corporate manslaughter; and how soon he will introduce such legislation. [104598]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We are currently considering the conclusions of the inter-departmental working group of officials which has been examining the recommendations made in the Law Commission's report no. 237 "Legislating the Criminal Code: Involuntary Manslaughter". The Law Commission's report included a recommendation that there should be a new offence of corporate killing.

We will be consulting our colleagues shortly and then expect to publish our conclusions for consultation. We will also be considering the prospects for future legislation.

Police Officers

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if validated figures for the total number of police officers per police force and in total at the end of October 1999 are available; and if he will make a statement. [104728]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 145W.

We collect police strength information only on a six monthly basis in order to reduce administrative burdens on the police. Police strength figures as at October 1999 will not therefore be requested from forces.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many serving police officers there were on 30 June and 31 December in each of the years 1992 to 1999 for which figures are available. [104465]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police numbers is set out in the table. From 1995, this information has been collected only twice yearly, in March and September.

Police numbers 1992 to 1999

	Number
June	
1992	127,626
1993	128,031
1994	127,328
December	
1992	128,045
1993	127,658
1994	127,358
March	
1995	127,222
1996	126,901
1997	127,158
1998	126,814
1999	126,096
September	
1995	126,808
1996	127,123
1997	126,862
1998	126,504
1999	[1] —

[1] Not yet available

Prison Service

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if the former Prison Service Director of Security has had access to the criteria for the competition for the operation of HMP Manchester and HMP Blakenhurst; and if he will make a statement; [104737]

(2) if members of the Prison Service Management Board have had access to the criteria for the competition for the design, construction, management and financing of HMP Peterborough and HMP Ashford; and if he will make a statement. [104738]

Mr. Boateng: The competitions for Blakenhurst, Manchester, Peterborough and Ashford prisons have not yet started and the evaluation criteria for those competitions have not yet been developed.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what rules govern senior employees of the Prison Service taking new employment with private companies which have contracts with or are seeking contracts with the Prison Service; how the rules have operated in relation to the former Director of Security; and if he will make a statement. [104739]

Mr. Boateng: The rules governing business appointments were last revised by the Cabinet Office in 1996 in the light of recommendations made by the Nolan Committee. The rules require senior civil servants in certain categories or other civil servants who have had

official dealings with their prospective employer to report offers of appointment. Approval is required for the initial appointment and any further appointment within two years of leaving Crown employment. These rules have been applied in relation to the former Prison Service Director of Security who made an application on 7 January 2000. In compliance with these rules, the advice of the Cabinet Office is being obtained before her application can be responded to.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the Home Office business appointment rules apply to members of the Prison Service Management Board; and if he will make a statement. [104735]

Mr. Boateng: All members of the Prison Service Management Board are subject to the rules on business appointments which have been issued by the Cabinet Office.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if members of the Prison Service Management Board had access to the deliberations of the evaluation panel reports of the bids for HMP Doncaster; and if he will make a statement. [104736]

Mr. Boateng: The members of the Prison Service Management Board received copies of the evaluation report of the bids for Doncaster prison in October 1999.

Jury Trial

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each of the last five years for which figures are available, in how many and what percentage of either-way cases in which *(a)* magistrates declined jurisdiction and *(b)* defendants elected to go to the higher court, defendants pleaded (i) guilty and (ii) not guilty; and if he will make a statement. [104731]

Mr. Charles Clarke: No regular statistics are collected on this. However, there is some information available from the baseline data collected by the Home Office in 1998 for the evaluation of the pilot schemes to reduce delay in the criminal justice system. In a sample of nearly 1,000 triable either way cases dealt with in the Crown Court, guilty pleas were entered by 80 per cent. defendants in cases in which the magistrates declined jurisdiction and by 59 per cent. of defendants who elected to go to the higher court. In 11 per cent. of cases in which magistrates declined jurisdiction and 30 per cent. of those where defendants elected Crown Court trial, the defendant entered a not guilty plea and there was a contested trial. In the remainder—most of which were dropped—no information is available as to plea.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each of the last five years for which figures are available, in what percentage of all either-way cases defendants elected for jury trial; and if he will make a statement. [104734]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Figures provided by the Attorney General's Department, which relate to prosecutions by the Crown Prosecution Service, are given in the table.

	Percentage of either way cases committed for trial on election of defendant	*Year on year change*
1995	33	—
1996	32	–1
1997	28	–4
1998	28	0
1999[1]	32	+4

[1] January-September

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each of the last five years for which figures are available, in how many and what percentage of summary-only cases defendants pleaded (i) guilty and (ii) not guilty. [104733]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is not collected centrally.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in each of the last five years for which figures are available, in how many and what percentage of indictable-only cases defendants pleaded (i) guilty and (ii) not guilty. [104732]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is contained in the table:

Number and proportion of defendants tried at the Crown Court for indictable-only offences by final plea, 1995[1]-98

		Type of plea					
		Guilty		*Not guilty*		*Not known*	
Year	*Total tried [=100 per cent.]*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
1995[1]	6,899	3,550	51	3,319	48	30	0
1996	15,565	8,327	53	7,203	46	35	0
1997	15,710	8,300	53	7,368	47	42	0
1998	16,740	8,644	52	8,046	48	50	0

[1] Plea data collected as from July 1995.

Metropolitan Police

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total number of *(a)* police officers and *(b)* police civilian staff (i) per Metropolitan police division and (ii) in total at the end of each of the last eight years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [104729]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan police informs me that the total number of police officers per Metropolitan police division as at 31 December for each of the last eight years is provided in the tables. Figures may not be strictly comparable year on year as a result of boundary and organisational changes. A comparable breakdown of police civilian staff figures is not available. The figures for civilians in the table refer to Area totals.

Police strengths at the end of December of year shown

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Kensington and Chelsea Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	563.7
Notting Hill	229	238	245	229	250.6	243.6	230	—
Brompton	—	—	371.83	375.4	391.8	365.5	341.58	—
Chelsea	187	199	—	—	—	—	—	—
Kensington	216	218.1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Westminster								
Belgravia	339.8	341.5	324.55	308.15	306.26	308.71	306.3	286.8
West End Central	373	339	328	316	308	309	298	304.6
Charing Cross	419.4	446.3	411.9	398.1	403.7	398.6	395.2	394.38
Marylebone	265.65	267.8	268.9	335.7	332.7	329.1	307.3	292.1
Paddington	—	—	466.2	356.6	350	352	324.2	345.11
Paddington Green	284	282.6	—	—	—	—	—	—
Harrow Road	224	224	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hammersmith and Fulham Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	532.12
Fulham	197	298	217	216.73	225.73	230.76	217.16	—
Hammersmith	344	340.33	328.2	316.4	335.52	311.02	300.82	—
Area sub-total	3,078.85	3,104.63	2,961.58	2,852.08	2,904.31	2,848.29	2,720.56	2,718.81
Camden Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	676.36
Hampstead	249	230	220	211	208.15	213.35	186.5	—
Kentish Town	263	260	269.7	276.86	274	285.46	291.66	—
Holborn	209.7	201.7	214.2	210.9	199.8	197.7	186.9	—
Islington Borough								
Holloway	260	272.6	270.6	269.9	255.9	250.5	245.01	226.4
Islington	287	295.5	297.3	292.1	313.7	298.9	284.4	284.2
Harrow Borough	272.2	277.2	272.2	293.8	283.4	289.05	281.45	291
Brent Borough								
Brent	240.91	253.7	266.7	258.6	272.6	266.48	257.48	246.01
Kilburn	383	366.4	385.28	359.14	367.26	346.75	336.18	313.88
Barnet Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	680.73
Barnet	306	316.4	323	300.3	285.26	277.26	225.55	—
Colindale	—	—	—	—	—	428.73	427.79	—
Golders Green	213.3	215.6	211.1	208.9	215.15	—	—	—
West Hendon	240	248.6	256.75	243.35	235.65	—	—	—
Ealing Borough								
Ealing	338.58	361.23	355.93	363.68	354.28	338.35	312.8	324.77
Southall	281.7	291.78	287.93	296.96	291.19	288.16	281.99	269.9
Haringey Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	511.75
Hornsey	270.6	276.6	284.95	273.6	263.3	261.4	245.4	—
Tottenham	291	285	295	271	271.7	265.1	273.1	—
Hillingdon Borough	453.9	443.98	439.5	437	418.7	398.2	395.5	409.3
Area sub-total	4,559.89	4,596.29	4,650.14	4,567.09	4,510.04	4,405.39	4,231.71	4,234.3
Hackney Borough								
Shoreditch and Hackney	333	324	336.68	324.6	326.8	330.4	329.32	313.12
Stoke Newington	278	309	356.5	334.94	349.24	346.24	338.1	325.25
Tower Hamlets Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	539.3
Limehouse	285	305	292	279	267	267.09	259.8	—
Whitechapel	—	—	341.7	334.7	329.4	300.4	301.3	—
Bethnal Green	187	184	—	—	—	—	—	—
Leman Street	197	201	—	—	—	—	—	—
Redbridge Borough								
Barkingside	270	279.4	296.4	291.1	292.4	268	260.98	255.88
Ilford	250	257	257.49	254	259.6	228.95	231.65	232.25
Waltham Forest Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	467.81
Chingford	234.4	242.4	243.8	237.3	238.3	238.7	241.9	—
Leyton	227.4	231.4	243.4	226	238.92	224.8	220.2	—

Police strengths at the end of December of year shown

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*
Havering Borough	366	375.01	377.17	363.49	351.05	334.33	326.38	326.54
Barking Borough								
Dagenham	286	287	304.6	303.2	299.85	299.8	279.12	276.72
Newham Borough								
Forest Gate	285	269.68	306.28	316.68	314.48	303.48	295.48	280.2
Plaistow	285	307.8	316.8	310	311.4	286.88	286.88	290.88
Enfield Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	533.57
Edmonton	258	259.46	270.2	265.38	261.78	268.3	267.68	—
Enfield	274	290	273.4	280.1	292.1	282	277	—
Area sub-total	4,015.8	4,122.15	4,216.42	4,120.49	4,132.32	3,979.37	3,915.79	3,841.52
Southwark Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	851.8
Southwark	283	293.53	289.12	306.08	308.88	289.18	296.87	—
Peckham	294.65	308.25	307.35	316.38	303.78	302.63	296.76	—
Walworth	239	248	275	280.4	265.5	268.7	282.8	—
Lewisham Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	533.57
Catford	280	257.6	260.7	294.8	[illegible]	290.85	287.9	—
Lewisham	313.6	330.8	337.6	347.8	[illegible]	319.38	307.56	—
Bromley Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	432.47
Bromley and Orpington	—	—	500.43	490.44	471.44	464.1	442.66	—
Orpington	211.44	217.58	—	—	—	—	—	—
Bromley	262	263	—	—	—	—	—	—
Greenwich Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	626.33
Plumstead	284	271	308.5	336.95	320.35	313.49	303.04	—
Greenwich	261	246.8	264.7	286.36	302.5	298.4	292.45	—
Bexley Borough								
Bexley Heath	277.5	273	285	295.5	287.3	282	274.4	281
Croydon Borough								
Croydon	285	277	296.5	291.3	297.36	272.84	265.38	246.73
South Norwood	312.6	302.69	327.3	342.58	327.98	327.77	324.34	321.83
Epsom and Ewell	373.9	390	428.9	431.38	405.23	404.5	392.81	387.12
Area sub-total	3,677.69	3,679.25	3,881.1	4,019.97	3,916.62	3,833.84	3,766.97	3,700.95
Heathrow division	441.55	423.94	414.39	396.19	366.99	362.06	340.73	297.23
Lambeth Borough								
Brixton	302	309	322.5	316.85	322.65	299.08	290.58	269.58
Streatham	266	262.8	273.9	280.01	272.71	251.3	253.3	242.65
Vauxhall	—	—	406.65	372.95	371.94	366.51	350.11	335.96
Kennington	182	175.1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Clapham	230.5	200.5	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hounslow Borough	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	416.48
Chiswick	190.4	210.7	202.7	206.5	197.2	186.3	171.71	—
Hounslow	261	272.2	263.6	277.7	272.7	270.26	266.3	—
Spelthorne	189.4	208.2	199.2	199.8	198.2	178.4	180.8	155.05
Richmond Borough								
Twickenham	298	321.35	297.45	319.85	295.85	283.15	267	279.14
Kingston Borough	375.4	395.7	373.14	393.34	362.24	366.89	329.89	325.89
Merton Borough	291.4	312	354.45	334.85	325.25	292.48	294.83	310.1
Wandsworth Borough								
Battersea	222	229.8	298.8	288.8	306.9	268.7	263.4	252
Wandsworth	217	217.6	348.98	349.38	355.38	327.18	312.58	320.03
Tooting	232.6	245.9	—	—	—	—	—	—
Area sub-total	3,699.25	3,784.79	3,755.76	3,736.22	3,648.01	3,452.31	3,321.53	3,204.11
Area total	19,031.48	19,287.11	19,465.00	19,295.85	19,111.30	18,519.20	17,956.56	17,699.69
MPS total	28,229.66	28,045.31	28,070.59	27,719.35	27,420.41	26,960.45	26,523.36	26,164.42

Civil strengths as at the end of December of year shown

Area	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*	*Area*
Divisional strength totals by area							
1. Central	713.22	752.35	743.2	683.68	618.25	595.65	Central
2. North West	945.55	999.19	1,055.55	999.77	966.72	1,951.18	North
3. North East	1,018.21	1,078.99	1,108.07	1,033.81	950.17	—	
4. South East	886.92	1,021.32	1,081.65	985.77	945.56	1,723.23	South
5. South West	999.64	1,106.49	1,139.94	1,037.12	1,010.2	—	
Total	4,653.54	4,958.34	5,128.41	4,740.15	4,490.9	4,270.06	
MPS Total	14,271.23	14,303.09	13,725.1	12,856.22	11,457.3	10,795.94	

Notes:
1. Totals for Area 5 South West (1994 to 1998) and South Area (1999) include Heathrow division.
2. All figures exclude traffic wardens and school crossing patrols.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters dated 26 August, 16 September and 19 November from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. A. Richards. [104457]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 13 January in response to his letters of 26 August, 16 September and 19 November on behalf of Mr. Richards. I am extremely sorry that I was unable to do so sooner, and would like, through my right hon. Friend, to extend my apology to Mr. Richards for the delay.

Fire Fatalities

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many fatalities in domestic premises were caused by fire in *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1993, *(c)* 1988, *(d)* 1983 and *(e)* 1999. [104507]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information provided relates to the number of deaths occurring in dwelling fires attended by United Kingdom local authority fire brigades.

Deaths in dwelling fires attended by local authority fire brigades, United Kingdom are given in the table:

Year	*Deaths*
1983	710
1988	731
1993	524
1998[1,2]	489
1999	[3]—

[1] 1998 data are estimated to account for revisions expected due to further information becoming available.
[2] Includes late calls. Heat and smoke incidents not recorded prior to 1994.
[3] Data not yet available.

Asset Sales

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the items in the National Assets Register sold by his Department, its agencies and associated public bodies since 11 February 1999, stating in each case the amount of money realised; if he will estimate the total amount raised from such sales to date; and if he will make a statement. [104472]

Mr. Straw: A review by my Department of sales of fixed assets previously listed in Chapter seven of the National Assets Register, is being undertaken. To date, it has revealed the following information for the Home Office, including the Prison Service:

Since 11 February 1999, land and buildings have been sold generating revenue of approximately £10,914,000; revenue from sales of vehicles was approximately £188,000; and sales of plant, machinery and Information Technology equipment produced £76,000.

Therefore, the total estimated revenue from such sales to date is £11,179,000 (rounded).

I regret that it is not possible to give an itemised list of such sales because of the large numbers involved and the disproportionate cost of compiling this information.

As soon as the remaining Home Office entities and the executive Non Departmental Bodies have completed their review, I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of the letter in the Library.

Stalking

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, further to his written answer of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 20W, on stalking, when he expects to receive the research report he has commissioned into the effectiveness of the Protection of Harassment Act 1997; and who is undertaking the research. [104843]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The research is currently being undertaken by my Research, Development and Statistics Directorate. I expect to receive the report by July.

British Greyhound Racing Funds

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received concerning the implications for animal welfare of the operation of the British Greyhound Racing Fund; and if he will make a statement. [104839]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have received a number of letters suggesting that not enough of the contributions made by bookmakers to the British Greyhound Racing Fund is devoted to the aftercare of greyhounds on retirement from racing. The distribution of Fund income

is not a matter for the Government. We are, however, pleased that the Fund and the National Greyhound Racing Club are both financially supporting the work of the Retired Greyhound Trust, which has had some success in increasing the number of dogs re-homed at the end of their racing careers.

CS Spray

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis indicating, in each year since 1997, the amount of CS spray which the Commissioner *(a)* purchased, *(b)* distributed, *(c)* returned to storage, *(d)* wrote off as no longer safe for operational purposes, indicating how such unsafe stocks are disposed of and *(e)* has not otherwise accounted for. [105075]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police tells me that in 1997, approximately 29,500 canisters of CS spray were purchased and distributed among Operational Command Units (OCUs). An annual breakdown of purchases since 1997 is not readily available, but since then, a total of approximately 1,000 canisters have been purchased by individual OCUs throughout the Metropolitan Police District. As of 13 January, approximately 1,500 used and 15 damaged canisters had been returned to storage at local OCUs for ultimate destruction by the Army. I understand that no canisters are unaccounted for.

LD50 Animal Test

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in encouraging the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to rescind guideline 401 concerning the LD50 animal test; what is Her Majesty's Government's policy toward this test; and if he will make a statement. [105072]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Section 5(5) of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, as amended in September 1998, does not allow licensing of the LD50 (Guideline 401) test for the purpose of meeting international regulatory requirements. The general principle is that a test will be licensed only where there is not a scientifically valid and reasonably practicable and accepted alternative. There may be cases where no exact alternative is available and Guideline 401 (the LD50 test) can lawfully be licensed.

With the support of the United Kingdom Government, the European Commission has invited the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to delete test 401 from its guidelines.

West Mercia Police

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many notifiable offences there were in West Mercia in each year from 1992 to date; and if he will make a statement; [105070]

(2) if he will list the clear-up rates for reported crime for West Mercia Police for each year from 1992 to date; and if he will make a statement. [105068]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The figures are given in the table.

	Notifiable offences	*Clear-up rate (%)*
1992	79,175	34
1993	82,832	29
1994	83,949	29
1995	80,013	28
1996	82,254	26
1997	76,762	28
1998–99[1]	81,782	34

[1] Year ending 31 March. The counting rules for notifiable offences changed on 1 April 1998. The figures given for this year are based on the new counting rules, which are not directly comparable to the previous figures. The clear-up rate is likewise not directly comparable.

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers West Mercia Police Authority had in each year from 1992 to date; and if he will make a statement. [105069]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is set out in the table.

West Mercia constabulary: Police numbers between 1992 and 1999

Year[1]	*Police numbers*
1992	2,034
1993	2,054
1994	2,059
1995	2,046
1996	2,017
1997	2,040
1998	2,010
1999	2,025

[1] As at 31 March

Handguns

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many handguns have been surrendered under the provisions of the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997; and of these how many have been *(a)* destroyed, *(b)* retained for training purposes, *(c)* retained for museum and display purposes, *(d)* sold for (i) export and (ii) re-use and *(e)* earmarked for other uses. [104802]

Mr. Charles Clarke: A total of 162,198 handguns were surrendered to the police under the terms of the Firearms (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 1997. The vast majority of these handguns will have been, or will be, destroyed when the associated compensation claims have been resolved. There are now less than 800 claims outstanding. A small number of surrendered handguns will be retained by the police, Her Majesty's Customs and the Forensic Science Service for training purposes. No central records are held of the number of handguns retained for this purpose. Examples of particular note or historic interest will be made available to suitably authorised museums. The National Museums Consortium, which represented museums in England and Wales for the purposes of the surrender exercise, has selected approximately 4,600 handguns for consideration for retention by museums. No surrendered handguns have been sold, either here or abroad, and none are earmarked for other purposes.

Rehabilitation

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to extend the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 to those sentenced to longer than 30 months. [104842]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Following the recommendation of the Better Regulation Task Force's Review of Fit Persons Criteria, we plan to review all the rehabilitation periods currently established by the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974.

Tharcisse Muvunyi

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the immigration status of Lt Col Tharcisse Muvunyi; when he was admitted to the UK; and what representations his Department has received concerning allegations made against him in respect of crimes against humanity. [104512]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* Lieutenant Colonel Muvunyi has limited leave to remain in the United Kingdom until 12 May 2002, having been admitted on 29 March 1998. The Home Office has received a number of representations concerning Lieutenant Colonel Muvunyi's alleged involvement in the genocide which took place in Rwanda in 1994. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda has jurisdiction to prosecute persons responsible for this crime and for other serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of Rwanda in the period in question, and was indeed established by the United Nations to do so. The Tribunal which is located in Arusha, Tanzania, has extensive powers to request assistance from states. We have assisted the Tribunal in the past by helping it to approach Lieutenant Colonel Muvunyi for an interview and have made it clear that if the Tribunal requests the future assistance of the United Kingdom, we will act appropriately.

Primates

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the import of primates from South-East Asia for onward export abroad for the purpose of experiment. [104280]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food authorises the transportation of animals, including primates, to the United Kingdom. Import licences for primates are issued under the Rabies (Importation of Dogs, Cats and other Mammals) Order 1974 (as amended). These specify the intended use and require the animals to be transported immediately after landing by an authorised carrying agent to an authorised quarantine premises. They must remain there for six calendar months. Licences are not required in the case of animals which land at a port or airport for onward export from the same place within 48 hours. If an animal is exported from the United Kingdom before the period of quarantine is completed, their movement to the port of departure must be licensed.

As such animals are not for use in regulated procedures in the United Kingdom, the Home Office has no involvement with them except where they are held in a supplying establishment designated under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. The establishment will be expected to meet the standards published in the Home Office Codes of Practice for the Housing and Care of Animals. All establishments are regularly inspected, often without prior notice, to assess compliance with the 1986 Act, the terms and conditions of the certificate of designation, and the standards set out in the Codes of Practice.

Police

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list by Police Authority for each of the last four years the number of *(a)* civilian and *(b)* non-civilian employees who have retired early on the grounds of ill health and the cost of such retirements. [105343]

Mr. Straw: Tables containing the information requested on the number of ill health retirements for civilian and non-civilian employees from each Police Authority during the past four years have been placed in the Library.

The Police Pension Scheme is administered locally by individual police authorities. The costs of ill health retirements are not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105301]

Mr. Straw: The requested information on unoccupied properties held by my Department and its agencies is set out in the table entitled "Wholly or mainly vacant properties on the Home Office non-prison estate".

In addition, the Home Office is in the process of acquiring/fitting out leasehold offices in London, Croydon and Merseyside to accommodate staff for new initiatives. It is anticipated that these properties will be occupied within a few weeks of acquisition.

Prison Estate

A strategic plan is currently being implemented to sell surplus Prison Service-owned land by 31 March 2002. This mainly involves plots of land near existing prison establishments; however, it does include three whole sites. These are two former stores sites at Branston, Staffordshire and Steventon, Oxfordshire, which are partially unoccupied and a site at Finnamore Wood near Marlow, Buckinghamshire, which is wholly unoccupied. The Service has also recently purchased sites for development at Ashworth—Merseyside, Belmarsh—South London, Peterborough and adjacent to Birmingham prison.

The following residential properties have been notified to the centre as being vacant. The Prison Service's Estate Section does not hold information on the length of time properties have been unoccupied and could only obtain this from the local Governors at disproportionate cost. However, the majority of the properties currently being marketed have been vacant for six months or less.

Wholly or mainly vacant properties on the Home Office non-prison estate

Property	*Unoccupied from*	*Reason*
Poltimore near Exeter, Devon (bunker/land)	December 1993	Sale with solicitors
Hope Cove, near Salcombe, Devon (bunker/land)	November 1992	Three separate sales imminent
Southwoods sub-station Southwoods, Yeovil (bunker/land)	November 1992 but used for automatic equipment until recently	Property to be sold
STC Gringley, Nottinghamshire (land)	March 1995	Intended as a Secure Training Centre. Planning consent refused and site is being prepared for sale
Lunar House, Croydon (offices)	July 1999	Property currently being refurbished for re-use
Bridge House, London (offices)	Acquired by HO December 1999	To be refurbished as new UK Passport Agency HQ
RAF Oakington, Cambridge (ex-military camp)	Acquired by HO January 2000	Being refurbished as an Immigration Reception Centre
HMP Aldington, Near Ashford, Kent (ex-prison)	August 1999	Ex-prison estate. To be demolished and site used as an Immigration Detention Centre
2 Marsham Street, London (offices)	Leased by HO April 1999 (mainly unoccupied)	Required for central London accommodation strategy. Bids expected 6 March 2000
16 vacant staff houses at the Fire Service College, Moreton-in-Marsh	1999 (varies, some have been vacant for a year, some have just become available)	To be let short-term pending outcome of College review

Vacant residential properties owned by HMPS in England and Wales listed by establishment as at 17 January 2000

Establishment	*Property type*	*Number*
Schedule A—vacant properties currently being disposed of		
Birmingham	House	1
Blantyre House, Goudhurst, Kent	House	1
Blundeston, Lowestoft, Sussex	House	1
Deerbolt, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham	House	1
Dover	House	1
Everthorpe, Brough Yorkshire	House	2
Exeter	House	1
Feltham, Middlesex	House	1
Foston Hall, Foston, Derby	House	1
Guys Marsh, Shaftsbury, Dorset	House	1
Haverigg, Millow, Cumbria	House	1
Kirkham, Preston	House	3

Vacant residential properties owned by HMPS in England and Wales listed by establishment as at 17 January 2000

Establishment	*Property type*	*Number*
Lindholme, Hatfield Doncaster	House	11
Long Lartin, Evesham, Worc.	House	2
Manchester	Flat	1
Mount, Hemel Hempstead	House	1
Parkhurst, Isle of Wight	House	1
Pentonville, London N7	House	1
Stockten, Stretton Leics.	House	13
Wandsworth, London SW18	Flat	1
Wayland, Griston Norfolk	House	1
Winchester	House	1
Wormwood Scrubs, London W12	House	4
Wymott, Leyland Preston	House	1

Vacant properties owned by HMPS in England and Wales listed by establishment as at 17 January 2000

Establishment	*Property type*	*Number*	*Retention*
Schedule B—vacant properties retained on security/operational grounds (including chaplains) or for future development			
Acklington, Morpeth Northumberland	House	1	Chaplain
Askham Grange, Askham Richard York	Flat	3	Operational/Security
Belmarsh, London SE28	House	1	Chaplain
Brixton, London SW2	Flat	1	Chaplain
Brixton	House	1	Chaplain
Buckley Hall, Rochdale Lancs	House	2	Operational/Security
Cookham Wood, Rochester Kent	House	1	Development
Durham	Flat	4	Chaplain
Gartree, Market Harborough Leics	House	1	Chaplain
Hollesley Bay, Woodbridge Suffolk	House	1	Operational/Security
Holloway, London N7	Flat	12	Development
Holloway	House	1	Operational/Security
Hull	House	1	Chaplain
Huntercombe, Nuffield Oxford	House	1	Chaplain
Kirkham, Preston Lancs	House	1	Chaplain
Latchmere House, Richmond Surrey	House	1	Development
Leeds	House	1	Chaplain
Leyhill, Wotton-Under-Edge, Glos	House	2	Chaplain (1)
Lindholme, Hatfield Doncaster	House	2	Chaplains
Long Lartin, Evesham Worcs	House	1	Chaplain
Low Newton, Durham	House	5	Development
Moorland, Hatfield Doncaster	House	2	Operational/Security

Vacant properties owned by HMPS in England and Wales listed by establishment as at 17 January 2000

Establishment	*Property type*	*Number*	*Retention*
Moreton Hall, Swinderby Lincoln	House	4	Development
North Sea Camp, Boston Lincolnshire	House	11	Development
Parkhurst, Isle of Wight	House	1	Development
Pentonville, London N7	House	1	Operational/Security
Portland	House	1	Operational/Security
Rochester	House	1	Operational/Security
Standford Hill, Isle of Sheppy Kent	House	1	Operational/Security
Stocken, Stretton Leics	House	5	Operational/Security
Styal, Wilmslow Cheshire	House	4	Operational/Security
Swinfen Hall, Lichfield Staffs	House	1	Operational/Security
Wandsworth, London SW18	Flat	1	Defective[1]
Wandsworth	House	1	Chaplain
Wormwood Scrubs, London W12	Flat	3	Leasehold[2]
Wormwood Scrubs	Flats	17	Development
		98	

[1] But plan to sell if possible
[2] Can be sold if freehold obtained

Refugee Accommodation

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what investigations he has carried out into *(a)* the quality of accommodation and *(b)* the value for money offered by accommodation for refugees in the United Kingdom. [105575]

Mrs. Roche: Recognised refugees have freedom of movement within the United Kingdom and access to housing in the same way as other British residents. There is, therefore, no intention to make investigations into the quality of accommodation which they occupy.

A procurement exercise is currently underway for accommodation for destitute asylum seekers under new arrangements for their support by the Home Office. All tenders received are commercially confidential. As part of the process of procurement, checks will be carried out to ensure the quality, suitability and value-for-money of accommodation offered in tenders. We expect these to be carried out in a number of ways, including: scrutiny of financial and other information; visits to some properties; and specified consultation with relevant local authorities.

Seconded Staff

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many staff were seconded from the private sector to his Department in *(a)* May 1997 to April 1998, *(b)* May 1998 to April 1999 and *(c)* May 1999 to the latest date for which figures are available, stating in each case the companies from which staff have been seconded. [103606]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 21 December 1999]:* Secondments and attachments are part of the Interchange Initiative which promotes the exchange of people and good practice between the Civil Service and other organisations. All sectors of the economy are involved: Voluntary, Education, Health, Public and Private. Interchange is a key component of the reform agenda. The Modernising Government White Paper committed us to increasing interchange, in particular by bringing in more people on secondment and sending more of our people out.

For the periods in question, two private sector staff are recorded as having been seconded to my Department. One was from Barclay's Bank between January 1997 to January 1999 and the other is from PriceWaterhouseCoopers for 12 months from 4 August 1999. Other inward secondments of three months or more recorded centrally in the above periods, were predominantly from local government, the health service, and the European Union.

PRIME MINISTER

Ayrshire

Q12. **Mr. Donohoe:** To ask the Prime Minister when he next plans to visit Ayrshire. [103528]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

Committee on Standards in Public Life

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement about the vacancy on the Committee on Standards in Public Life. [106130]

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to announce that Ann Abraham has accepted my invitation to serve as a member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life in succession to Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe who stood down at the end of last year.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank Baroness Warwick for her valuable contribution to the work of the Committee over the past five years.

British-Irish Council

Dr. Godman: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the names of those who attended the inaugural meeting of the British-Irish Council, together with the names of their parliaments or assemblies; when and where the Council will next meet; and if he will make a statement. [105572]

The Prime Minister: The British-Irish Council, which was established under the Belfast Agreement, held its inaugural summit meeting in London on 17 December. The membership of the Council comprises the UK and Irish

Governments, the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and the administrations in the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey.

I led the UK delegation and, as host, chaired the meeting. The remainder of the UK delegation consisted of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The other delegations were as follows:

Ireland

the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD

the Tánaiste, Mary Harney TD

Minister for Foreign Affairs, David Andrews TD

Minister for Justice, John O'Donoghue

Northern Ireland

First Minister, the right hon. David Trimble MLA MP

Deputy First Minister, Seamus Mallon MLA MP

Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey MLA

Minister for Finance and Personnel, Mark Durkan MLA

Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Bairbre de Brún MLA

Scotland

First Minister, the right hon. Donald Dewar MSP MP

Deputy First Minister, Jim Wallace MSP MP

Permanent Secretary at the Scottish executive, Muir Russell

Wales

First Secretary, the right hon. Alun Michael JP AM MP

Assembly Business Secretary, Andrew Davies AM

Finance Secretary, Edwina Hart AM

Isle of Man

Chief Minister, hon. Donald Gelling MHK

Chief Secretary, Fred Kissack

Jersey

President, Policy and Resources Committee, Senator Pierre Horsfall

Chief Executive, Policy and Resources Committee, John Mills

Guernsey

President, Advisory and Finance Committee, Conseiller Laurie Morgan

Chief Executive, Advisory and Finance Committee, Mike Brown.

The Council agreed that its next summit meeting should take place in Dublin at the end of June 2000.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday, 19 January. [105232]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister (1) how many recent papers considered by the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee have been drafted by Liberal Democrat hon. Members; [105668]

(2) what plans he has to establish joint working groups between Government and Liberal Democrat hon. Members with a brief to report back to the Joint Cabinet Consultative Committee. [105667]

The Prime Minister: As a Cabinet Committee the Joint Consultative Committee's proceedings are exempt from disclosure under the exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, dealing with internal discussion and advice.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Television

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 37W, if he will list the organisations and individuals who made representations in favour of the suggested supplement to the licence fee for digital television purposes. [104113]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 10 January 2000]:* We will publish details of the responses to the Davies report when we announce the outcome of the review, shortly. This will include a summary of them. Subject to obtaining the permission of the organisations concerned, we will also make available the responses themselves. Pending our obtaining that permission, the responses must be regarded as having been given in confidence.

World Cup

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the progress of the campaign to host the 2006 football World Cup in the United Kingdom. [104793]

Kate Hoey: FIFA will make its final decision as to the host country for the 2006 FIFA World Cup on 6 July and so that FA's bid is entering its final critical stage of campaigning. During their visit in October last year, the FIFA Inspection Team made clear their view that England has a very strong technical bid. Efforts to convey its strengths, together with the many proposed legacy benefit associated with hosting a World Cup in England, will be maximised by the FA bid team in the coming months. The government's Envoy to the bid team will play a full part in this work.

An integral part of recent activity by the bid team has been the stepping up of lobbying of the 24 FIFA voters, involving both receiving visitors in England and the co-ordination of overseas visits. Recent events have included attendance by members of the bid team at the 2002 FIFA World Cup Preliminary Draw in Tokyo, the FIFA Under 17 Championships in New Zealand and the World Club Championship in Brazil involving Manchester United. In the coming months the bid team will make important presentations to each of FIFA's six Confederations across the world. The timetable for these presentations is as follows:

20 January: CAF, Ghana

5 February: CONMEBOL, Paraguay

12–13 May: CONCACAF, Bahamas

18 May: AFC, Malaysia

Week commencing 22 May: OFC, New Zealand

30 June: UEFA, Luxembourg.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iran

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the number of stockpiled *(a)* chemical weapons with blister, blood and choking agents and *(b)* bombs and artillery shells for the agents' delivery being held by Iran. [104783]

Mr. Hain: In conjunction with other Government Departments we regularly assess the status of a number of countries' stockpiles of chemical weapons and the equipment associated with its delivery. Such assessments draw heavily on intelligence sources and we are therefore unable to comment further.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the long-range ballistic missile capability of Iran and its effect on the balance of power in the region. [104997]

Mr. Hain: We regularly discuss proliferation issues with Iran and have frequently expressed our concern about Iranian attempts to develop ballistic missile systems. We remain particularly concerned by Iran's development of the Shahab-3 ballistic missile. Such a system could pose a threat to stability in the region.

Iran is not the only country in the region to possess such technology, and we understand Iran's legitimate security concerns. Despite this we continue to urge Iran to refrain from the development of ballistic missiles.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the progress made by Iran towards the acquisition of non-conventional weapons. [104996]

Mr. Hain: In conjunction with other Government Departments, we regularly assess the status of efforts by a number of countries to develop or acquire weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. Such assessments draw heavily on intelligence sources and we are therefore unable to comment further.

Iran is a Non-Nuclear-Weapon State Party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. We continue to encourage Iran to respect these treaties and to comply fully with its obligations under them.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) what assessment he has made of the extent to which the Iranian President is in control of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence; [105000]

(2) what assessment he has made of the extent to which the Iranian President is in control of Iran's security services. [104999]

Mr. Hain: The internal workings of the Iranian Government are a matter for the Iranian people. As far as our dealings with Iran are concerned, President Khatami is the head of the Iranian Government, with responsibility for all Ministries within that Government.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the role of *(a)* the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and *(b)* the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security in acts of terror. [105001]

Mr. Battle: This Government condemn terrorism in all its forms. Any such specific assessments could only come from intelligence sources and would, therefore, be exempted from disclosure under Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on access to Government Information.

Ukraine

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to Annexe 5, Paragraph 3 of the Common Strategy for the Ukraine agreed at the Helsinki European Council, when and where the Partnership Agreement with the Ukraine was negotiated; when it came or will come into effect; who were its signatories; and to what parliamentary procedures it has been or will be subject. [105082]

Mr. Vaz: The EU Partnership and Co-operation Agreement with Ukraine was negotiated in Brussels during 1993–94 and signed on 14 June 1994. It came into force on 1 March 1998 after ratification by all parties to the PCA: Ukraine, the 15 EU members states, the European Community, the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Atomic Energy Community.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the role of Her Majesty's Ambassador in Kiev in implementing Her Majesty's Government's policy on relations between the United Kingdom and Ukraine. [105127]

Mr. Vaz: Her Majesty's Ambassador in Kiev is charged with promoting the interests of the United Kingdom in Ukraine. The Ambassador plays a central role in pursuing Her Majesty's Government's policy, explaining that policy to the Government of Ukraine, and advising Her Majesty's Government on developments in Ukraine.

International Court of Justice

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the answer of 13 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 19W, on the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, if he will make a statement on the application of the Court's jurisdiction to those Member States which had not been party to any decision of the European Council taken under article 23 of the consolidated Treaty on European Union. [105133]

Mr. Vaz: Article 23 of the consolidated Treaty on European Union is not relevant to the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, which is governed by Article 36 of the Statute of the Court.

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European Councils

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what requirements are placed on applicants for membership of the European Union as regards accepting all the currently applicable decisions and conclusions of European Councils; and what the basis is for such requirements. [105128]

Mr. Vaz: In order to become members of the EU, applicants must meet the criteria agreed at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 (annexed).

At the opening of the accession negotiations with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia on 31 March 1998, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, representing the Presidency, laid down the principles for negotiation, emphasising the necessity of

> "full acceptance of the actual and potential rights and obligations attaching to the Union system and its institutional framework, known as the 'acquis' of the Union".

This includes the decisions and conclusions of European Councils. The applicant's acceptance of the 'acquis' may give rise to technical adjustments, and exceptionally to non-permanent transitional measures. The same principles will govern the accession negotiations with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia, which will begin in February 2000.

Ilisu Dam

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 31W, on the Ilisu Dam, what specific issues were raised by the Syrian Ambassador about the Ilisu Dam at his meeting with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 23 December. [R] [104853]

Mr. Hain: The Syrian Ambassador asked the FCO to take full account of the impact of the Ilisu Dam project on the Syrian economy and people, on relations between Syria and Turkey, and on legal obligations.

These issues are reflected in the statement by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on 21 December, which outlined the UK's four key concerns, including the need for an assurance that adequate downstream water flows be maintained at all times.

Counter-terrorism (USA)

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has received a copy of the testimony of the Co-ordinator for Counter-terrorism in the US State Department before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 2 November 1999; and if he will make a statement. [105002]

Mr. Battle: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has received a copy of the State Department's testimony. We liaise closely with the United States on counter-terrorism issues both bilaterally and in international fora, such as the G8.

Iraq

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what goods on the UK Military List have recently been approved for export to Iraq. [106111]

Mr. Hain: Following consultation with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Trade and Industry recently approved a licence to export 160 protective vests to Iraq for use by UN personnel in a humanitarian demining programme. The export of the equipment to Iraq was approved under the oil for Food Programme by the UN Sanctions Committee.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105302]

Mr. Battle: The following properties are wholly unoccupied:

Frankfurt former Residence—vacant since 1998

Jakarta former Residence—vacant since 1996

Plymouth former Residence—vacant since 1995 (owned by Government of Montserrat)

St. Johns former Residence—vacant since 1999

Tripoli Offices—vacant since 1984.

The following properties are mainly unoccupied:

Baghdad Offices—since 1991

Ho Chi Minh City former Residence—since 1993

Kabul Offices—since 1992

Old Admiralty Building, London—since 1999.

India

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received concerning the Vishwa Hindu Parishad Organisation's attack on a Christian meeting in India; and if he will make a statement. [105576]

Mr. Hain: We are aware of reports of attacks on Christians in India and have received many letters on this subject. We have made clear our concern about attacks on religious minorities to the Indian authorities on a number of occasions. I raised this most recently with my Indian interlocutors, including the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, during my visit there in November.

Indonesia

Mr. Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy on extending the arms embargo on Indonesia; and if he will make a statement. [105578]

Mr. Hain: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) on 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 325W.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debt Relief

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the role of her Department in monitoring and measuring the bilateral debt relief programme. [105681]

Mr. Foulkes: Our Department has no direct role in monitoring and measuring the use of the bilateral debt relief which is provided as part of an international agreement, including that given under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. We strongly welcome the sharpened poverty focus of the HIPC Initiative agreed in September 1999. In order to benefit under the enhanced Initiative, HIPC countries will have to produce a poverty reduction strategy (PRS), based around the achievement of the international development targets. Our Department is closely engaged in the international discussions on the development of these strategies, including how they will be monitored. We place great importance on both civil society and the international community being able to monitor their implementation, and we recognise that increased international efforts will be required in this area. In November 1999, the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century was launched. Its aims are to provide statistical assistance to HIPC countries in producing their poverty reduction strategies and to develop sustainable statistical capacity in the longer term, to inform and support pro-poor policy making, and programme design. DFID is devoting additional resources to achieve these aims, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

Bilateral debt relief provided on aid loans owed to our Department is given in the context of our development partnership, and monitored in the same way as all other programmes and projects. The Government have recently announced that they will provide 100 per cent. relief on all the bilateral debt owed to the Export Credit Guarantee Department by qualifying HIPC countries. No additional conditionality will be attached to the provision of this relief nor will special efforts be made to monitor its use. We are confident that the conditions of the revised HIPC Initiative are sufficient to guarantee that monies freed up will be spent on poverty reduction.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if the British Council will be involved in monitoring the outcome of debt relief measures. [105683]

Mr. Foulkes: The British Council will not be involved in monitoring the outcome of debt relief measures.

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the countries that will benefit from debt relief, stating *(a)* by how much in each case and *(b)* their order of priority. [105235]

Mr. Foulkes: The following 41 countries are classified as Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC):

Angola, Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Guyana, Honduras, Kenya, Lao PDR, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Vietnam, Yemen, and Zambia.

To date, debt relief has been provided (in net present value terms) under the HIPC Initiative as follows:

Countries	*Date*	*$ million*
Uganda	April 1998	347
Bolivia	September 1998	448
Guyana	May 1999	256
Mozambique	July 1999	1,716

No other country has received debt relief under HIPC to date, and it is not possible to provide figures on what each will receive in the future. Following the revisions agreed last September, the HIPC Initiative will provide faster, deeper and wider debt relief. This will amount to around $50 billion (in nominal terms), which is more than twice as much as under the original framework. The countries listed will receive additional debt relief, and those countries yet to receive relief will be assessed against the new debt sustainability ratios.

Countries not classified as HIPC may nevertheless receive assistance with their debt from the Paris Club of official bilateral creditors. There are a variety of terms which may be offered to a debtor country, in the form of debt reduction for the poorest countries and debt rescheduling.

The Government are pressing for the speedy implementation of the revised HIPC framework. Our target, which was agreed by the international community last year, is for three-quarters of eligible HIPC countries to be receiving relief on their debts by the end of 2000.

Kosovo

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to visit Kosovo. [105688]

Clare Short: I have no plans to do so.

Departmental Casual Staff

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the number of casual staff employed by her Department for every quarter since 1 May 1997. [105682]

Mr. Foulkes: The information is provided in the table:

Date	*Number of casual staff in post* [1]
1 October 1999	30
1 July 1999	40
1 April 1999	32
1 January 1999	29
1 October 1998	32
1 July 1998	40
1 April 1998	39
1 January 1998	39
1 October 1997	40
1 July 1997	43

[1] Data is available only for the total number of casual staff in post as at the beginning of each quarter. The figures are provided on this basis

Departmental Website

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what was the cost of *(a)* setting up and *(b)* updating her Department's website; and how often it is updated. [105692]

Mr. Foulkes: The Department for International Development's (DFID) website was set up in 1997 at an initial cost of £10,000. The annual maintenance cost is £12,000 and development costs for 1998–99 were £3,500. The website is updated regularly, usually on a daily basis.

Poverty Reduction

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the role of the IMF in poverty reduction. [105236]

Mr. Foulkes: At the Annual Meetings of the World bank and IMF in September 1999, as part of the discussion on revision of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative it was agreed that all low-income countries would produce poverty reduction strategies (PRS). The process of developing these strategies will be led by national Governments, and involve discussion with civil society and the international community, including the IMF. They will integrate macro-economic objectives, structural reforms and social policies and programmes, and centre on the achievement of the international development targets. The IMF have committed themselves to providing their assistance to the poorest countries within the framework of these poverty reduction strategies; as a sign of this new focus, the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) has been redesignated as the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF).

This commitment to the poverty reduction strategy approach is consistent with the recommendations of the 1998 Review of ESAF, which proposed that the IMF should take more account of the social impact of their programmes, consider the quality of Government expenditure and protect budgets in high priority areas such as health and education. It encouraged greater joint working with the World bank, and emphasised the need to build broad-based support for reform programmes, to ensure their success. Following proposals put forward by the UK, the World bank, in consultation with the IMF and the UN, has developed principles of good practices in social policy. We envisage that these principles will be drawn upon in the design of poverty reduction strategies and supporting donor programmes.

Departmental Smoking Policy

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she is taking to reduce smoking in her Department. [105798]

Mr. Foulkes: Smoking is not permitted in the workplace. However, separate accommodation is available for staff and visitors who wish to smoke occasionally. In addition, we provide staff with information on the health implications of smoking and offer counselling and support to those who want to give up smoking.

Staff Bonuses

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much her Department, its agencies and associated public bodies spent in total on extra bonuses above usual payments for staff working over the new year period; what were the *(a)* maximum and *(b)* minimum bonuses paid; how many people received the (i) maximum and (ii) minimum payments; and if she will make a statement. [104469]

Clare Short: The total spent on extra bonuses to civil servants in my Department was £16,900. Twenty-nine people received the maximum payment of £500. Fifteen people received the minimum bonus of £100.

This was mainly to ensure that the Department for International Development's (DFID) information systems world wide were functioning properly and to correct any problems before the resumption of normal business on 4 January.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Small Business Service

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Government will publish its response to the consultation document on the Small Business Service. [105978]

Ms Hewitt: I have today placed in the Library of both Houses a document which gives a summary of the replies to the consultation and sets out the Government's response.

We had an excellent response to the consultation to shape the remit of the Small Business Service. We received 700 replies from a wide range of individuals and organisations, including many small businesses. The vast majority warmly welcomed our proposals.

I look forward to the launch of the Small Business Service this April under its Chief Executive, David Irwin.

Household Products (Pesticides)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out the labelling requirements which apply to the presence of *(a)* Lindane and *(b)* other pesticides in household products. [104652]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 13 January 2000]:* All non-agricultural pesticides supplied to consumers must be approved under the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 (as amended), which require, among other things, that manufacturers must name on the product label the active ingredient(s), such as Lindane, present in the product. Under the regulations, a scientific assessment by the relevant Registration Authority (MAFF or HSE) of each individual product is carried out. This evaluation indicates what other labelling information is required, such as the safe use of the product and warnings about precautions that should be taken. Following approval, products are subject to an on-going review programme which ensures that the data on which the product approvals are based meets current safety standards.

Developing Countries

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his statement to the House on 9 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 1024, on the World Trade Organisation, what steps the Director General of the World Trade Organisation has taken to achieve the objective of a five-fold increase in the budget for technical assistance and capacity building for developing countries. [104588]

Mr. Caborn: The Director General made a plea to all WTO members to increase regular budget funding for technical assistance to which he hoped to secure agreement in Seattle in the context of wider agreement on the launch of the new Round. In the absence of the wider agreement, there is as yet no consensus for enhanced regular budget funding of technical assistance. The UK will pursue this further in the WTO Budget Committee in Geneva and in discussions with EU and other partners.

Arms Exports

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will provide details of the licences granted *(a)* for the export of weapons silencers to Turkey since 2 May 1997 and *(b)* to Law Enforcement International Ltd. for the export of weapons silencers since 2 May 1997. [104156]

Dr. Howells: The entry in the legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating and most ratings cover a range of goods. Weapons silencers are controlled under entries ML1, ML2, ML6 and PL5018 in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, as amended, commonly known as the Military List.

As regards export licences granted for the export of weapons silencers to Turkey between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1998, details of export licensing decisions in this period were set out in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls, published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; copies are in the Library of the House. As regards licences granted since 1 January 1999, the Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated. Between 1 January 1999 and 3 January 2000, 21 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and no Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued for the export of goods with a relevant rating to consignees or end users in Turkey. The paper records of the 21 SIELs have been examined and none covered the export of weapons silencers.

As regards export licences granted to Law Enforcement International Limited for the export of weapons silencers, inquiries are being made under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Where confidential information is involved, the parties concerned may be asked if they object to disclosure, and this can take some time. I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

This information should be considered in light of the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Mr. Berry) on 27 July 1999, *Official Report*, columns 307–08W.

Insolvency Practices Council

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the salary is of the newly-appointed chairman of the Insolvency Practices Council. [104889]

Dr. Howells: The Insolvency Practices Council is an independent body which is to be funded by IPR Services Ltd., a company limited by guarantee set up by the insolvency recognised professional bodies. Questions concerning the salary of Mr. Graham Kentfield, the recently appointed chairman of the Council, are a matter for that company.

British Business Promotion

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what initiatives his Department is taking to promote British business abroad. [105268]

Mr. Caborn: British Trade International brings together DTI and FCO responsibilities for trade development and promotion in a new unified operation. The goals of British Trade International are set out in a National Strategy, which was published on 29 October 1999.

Copies of the Strategy have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Truck Manufacturing (North-West)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assistance he is giving to truck manufacturing in the north-west. [105263]

Mr. Alan Johnson: While truck manufacturers based in the north-west of England have received no direct financial assistance from my Department in recent years, officials in London and the Government Office for the north-west in Manchester provide help and advice on a number of issues. In addition, north-west truck manufacturers benefit from wider automotive industry competitiveness and technology initiatives. These include the SMMT Industry Forum, to which the DTI has contributed £6.5 million, and the DTI-led Foresight Vehicle programme, to which the Government are contributing £12 million.

Car Pricing

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on car pricing in the UK. [105276]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Competition Commission is currently investigating the supply of new cars in the United Kingdom. I have no doubt the Commission is looking at car prices as part of its investigation.

The Commission is due to deliver its report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 31 January. The report will be published as soon as practicable.

Manufacturing Industry

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the effect of the strong pound on UK manufacturing industry in the last 12 months. [105271]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government understand the concerns of businesses, and particularly manufacturers trading with Europe, about the value of the pound. However, there are increasing signs that companies are adjusting to the high value of sterling. In the third quarter the volume of exports of goods and services grew at the fastest rate for 20 years. Manufacturing output also increased over the same period by 1.2 per cent., the fastest quarterly rate of growth since 1994, and the CBI's business confidence indicator is also at its highest level since April 1995.

Electricity Meters

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many properties in *(a)* Tamworth and *(b)* the United Kingdom have electric card meters; what proportion this represents of all properties; and how much is paid for electricity by a customer using (i) an electric card meter and (ii) standard payment methods. [105146]

Mrs. Liddell: There are no electric card pre-payment meters in Tamworth but there are 5,329 token meters. In the United Kingdom there are 3.6 million pre-payment meters (including card and token meters). This represents around 15 per cent. of the number of domestic customers in the United Kingdom (as at March 1998). An average annual bill for an East Midlands Electricity customer on a pre-payment meter tariff would be £263.15 as opposed to £241.95 for a standard payment tariff (both based on a consumption of 3,300 kWh).

Post Offices

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what means individuals will be able to exercise their proposed right of access to a post office in circumstances where an existing postmaster or postmistress is retiring and no other person is willing to continue the business. [105150]

Mr. Alan Johnson: For the first time the Government will be setting criteria for access to postal services, and there will be a requirement in law for the new Postal Services Commission to monitor these criteria to ensure that they are being met, and to advise my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State of any concerns about access to postal services in local areas. Particular attention will be paid to rural and socially deprived areas. Following work by the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU), access criteria for Post Office services will be announced within the next few months.

Sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses own their businesses and any decision to sell or retire is a matter for them. But our proposals will ensure that the effects of their decision on the provision of services in local areas can be considered. Under our proposals, where an individual sub-post office closes, individuals will be able to appeal to the Post Office Users' Council about the provision of post offices in their area if they do not receive a satisfactory response from the Post Office. Using the access criteria as a benchmark, the Users' Council, through the Commission, will take up specific cases with the Post Office to ensure the access criteria are met.

Coal Industry

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will formulate plans for state aid to the UK coal industry which are compliant with article 2(1) of Commission Decision 3632/93/ECSC. [104902]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* Article 2 (1) of Commission Decision 3632/93/ECSC sets out the three objectives for which aid to the coal industry might be considered compatible with the ECSC Treaty.

The Judgment of the Court of First Instance of 9 September 1999 in respect of case T-220/98 made it clear that the three objectives listed correspond individually to particular categories of aid.

The first category refers to operating aid under Article 3 of the Decision, which must cause no distortion of competition or discrimination between UK coal producers or users, requires a plan showing a significant reduction in operating costs over the period to July 2002 with the prospect of viability thereafter. There is also a requirement for degression of aid.

The second category is in respect of aid to solve the social and regional problems created by total or partial reduction in the activity of production units. Aid for the Reduction of Activity under Article 4 requires a closure date to be set, which must normally be before expiry of the Decision in 2002. There is no provision for investment aid within the ECSC state aid code set out in the Decision. The Government have Commission approval under Article 5 of Decision 3632/93/ECSC to pay state aid up to £891 million over the period to July 2002 in respect of residual environmental and ex-employee liabilities inherited from British Coal.

The third category covers objectives to help the coal industry adjust to the introduction of new environmental protection standards which require the modification of existing installations.

We are continuing to work constructively with the industry to promote a level playing field for coal both in the UK and in Europe, and to identify undue regulatory burdens.

Departmental Smoking Policy

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he is taking to reduce smoking in his Department. [105792]

Dr. Howells: In buildings occupied and controlled by my Department, smoking is permitted only in a small number of designated rooms or areas. Advice and guidance is available to staff who wish to give up, cut down, or control their smoking.

Holbeck Holdings

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the date is of the most recent documents received by Companies House concerning the financial standing of Holbeck Holdings of Kilmarnock. [105295]

Dr. Howells: Holbeck Holdings Ltd., Company number 0609393, has its registered office in Horncastle, Lincolnshire. It has a wholly owned subsidiary, Buitelaar (Kilmarnock) Ltd., Company number 2190181, with

the same registered office address. Accounts for both companies for the year to 30 April 1998 were received on 14 January 1999 and subsequently registered by Companies House.

Export Credits Guarantee Scheme

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the savings from the recently announced changes to the export credits guarantee scheme in the *(a)* current and *(b)* next four financial years. [105839]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* ECGD's new Fixed Rate Export Finance (FREF) scheme, which became effective on 1 December, is designed to achieve an improved balance between the interests of the UK exporter and the taxpayer. Financial outturn under the scheme will depend on a number of factors, including the future mix and level of business, which is uncertain. But if the recent business mix is maintained over the coming period, taxpayer savings of around £1 million per annum should accrue for every £1 billion of new loan outstanding supported under the scheme.

Synchrotron Project

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the ADD Report the synchrotron project will be made available to the public. [105625]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* The full ADD Report will not be made available to the public. Its release is exempt under Part 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (Exemption 2—Internal discussions and advice; Exemption 7—Effective management of operations of the public service). The key conclusions of the report together with a summary will be published following the site announcement.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of the minimum wage on the *(a)* level of employment and *(b)* profitability of businesses. [104882]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government asked the independent Low Pay Commission to report on the implementation of the national minimum wage, particularly its impact on employment and competitiveness. We received the Commission's Report in December and will publish the Report and the Government's response as soon as Ministers have had an opportunity to consider its findings and recommendations.

Nuclear Materials (Safeguards)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on how many occasions nuclear materials have been withdrawn from safeguards under the provisions of the Tripartite Agreement between the UK, Euratom and IAEA since May 1997; and if he will list the nuclear establishments involved and respective reasons for withdrawal. [104701]

Dr. Howells: Between May 1997 and the end of 1999 there were 20 advance notifications of the withdrawal of nuclear material from safeguards pursuant to Article 14 of the UK/IAEA/Euratom Safeguards Agreement. The withdrawals comprised small quantities of material for use in instrument calibration or radiation detectors, or as analytical tracers or radiological shielding. The organisations from which the withdrawals took place were UKAEA Harwell, the National Physical Laboratory, Nycomed Amersham, Centronics Ltd., and RSL Equipment Ltd. The establishments to which the material concerned was transferred were AWE Aldermaston, HM Naval Base Devonport, DERA Gosport and NRTE Vulcan, Dounreay.

As indicated by the previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle), in his answer of 19 October 1998, *Official Report*, column 1046W, a study of data on withdrawals from safeguards which took place prior to announcement of the outcome of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) is being conducted, the outcome of which will be made public later this year.

DEFENCE

Nancekuke Base, Cornwall

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence further to his answer to the hon. Member for Salisbury of 11 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 707–08W, on work at Nancekuke, if any additional information has come to light. [104505]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given to my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) on 11 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 125–26W.

Ms Atherton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on substances buried at the Nancekuke base in Cornwall. [105606]

Mr. Spellar: A Land Quality Assessment is currently under way at RAF Portreath, formerly Nancekuke, in line with the Ministry of Defence's policy of undertaking such assessments over a 10 year period from 1996. As part of this work, surface soil and water samples have been taken for laboratory analysis. This analysis has revealed no signs of contamination from toxic agents.

Common Foreign and Security Policy

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answers of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 343–44W, on the common foreign and security policy, if he will make a statement on developments in the issues referred to in his answers following the European Council in Helsinki in December 1999. [105657]

Mr. Hoon: At the Helsinki European Council, EU member states committed themselves to improving their military capabilities so that they will be better able to assemble, deploy rapidly and sustain effective forces for NATO or EU-led operations. In particular, they agreed a headline goal, specifying that by 2003 they should be able to deploy within 60 days, and sustain for at least one year, military forces of up to 50,000–60,000 persons capable of undertaking the full range of Petersberg tasks.

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The Helsinki European Council also confirmed the political and military structures that will be necessary for the EU to decide and act in response to crises, where NATO as a whole is not engaged. To this end, EU member states agreed to establish a permanent EU Political and Security Committee, an EU Military Committee, and an EU Military Staff, with interim bodies to be established by March 2000.

This work will be taken forward under the Portuguese Presidency of the EU.

Training Exercises (Ration Packs)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the level of availability of ration packs for training exercises in the field; and what orders have been issued to limit distribution of such items. [105590]

Mr. Spellar: A food war reserve of Operational Ration Packs (ORP) is maintained to support operational deployments. ORP is a lifed product and stock is turned over accordingly. The ORP that is turned over is made available for training and exercises and its distribution is agreed annually with the Services in line with availability. Reductions in the amount of stock carried as a war reserve have reduced the amount of ORP turned over. The implications for the training programme are currently being evaluated, including the option to procure additional ration packs specifically for training.

Kosovo

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of the British contribution to the intervention in Kosovo to the end of 1999; and what are the projected costs for 2000. [105503]

Mr. Hoon: As at the end of October, the Ministry of Defence had incurred net additional expenditure of £125 million on Kosovo operations this financial year. The figure is expected to rise to just below £400 million by the end of 1999–2000.

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will estimate the costs of the Kosovo deployment for the current financial year. [105618]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* The net additional expenditure incurred this financial year on Kosovo operations is expected to be just below £400 million. I have agreed with my Treasury colleagues that these costs will be covered by the Reserve and I am currently discussing the details in the context of my Department's Spring Supplementary Estimates.

Departmental Land (Access Rights)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what rights of access currently exist for hunting wild mammals with dogs on his Department's land. [105496]

Mr. Spellar: There are 35 licensed fox hunts and beagle packs that have access to areas of Ministry of Defence land. The areas into which access is permitted are agreed, with each individual hunt or pack, at the time the annual licence is issued. Entry into these areas is determined throughout the licence period against the military training requirement, which will always take priority.

HMS Westminster

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, columns 97–98W, concerning HMS Westminster and the In Year Budget Management Measure, what were the sums allocated for fuel for the Fleet in the current year and in the two previous years; and what provision is made in the budget for increases in fuel prices. [105148]

Mr. Spellar: The sums allocated for fuel for the Fleet (HM Warships and RFAs) in the current year and the two previous years were as follows:

	£ million
1997–98	34.572
1998–99	40.283
1999–2000	[1]37.924

[1] The allocation for the current year includes £9.5 million over and above the original allocation.

No specific provision is made in the budget for increases in fuel prices, however my Department uses normal in year management flexibility to cope with the effects of short-term changes such as this.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105306]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I will write to the hon. Gentleman and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Meteor Missiles

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what safeguards have been offered to ensure that the UK maintains control over the sale of Meteor missiles as part of the package with Eurofighter Typhoons to third countries. [105648]

Mr. Hoon: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Armed Forces Discipline Bill

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Special Investigation Bureau investigators are currently employed and at what locations; and by how many he will expand the service following the enactment of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill. [105649]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is as follows:

The Naval Service

The Royal Naval Special Investigation Branch comprises a total of 20 investigators, all of whom are based at Portsmouth, but who have a Fleet and world-wide remit. It is not intended to expand their numbers following the enactment of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill.

The Army

Location	*Number*
Upavon	5
Colchester	6
Aldershot	13
Shorncliffe	2
Bulford	11
Plymouth	1
Bulford (HQ)	15
York	5
Catterick	6
Hounslow	8
Edinburgh	7
Donnington	7
Preston	1
Chichester (Trg)	9
Hohne	7
Osnabruck	7
Bielefeld	3
Gutersloh	6
Rheindahlen (Inc)	16
Sennelager	7
Northern Ireland	20
Cyprus	4
Canada (BATUS)	11
Total	167

The table shows the number of Special Investigation Branch investigators by their permanent location. Eleven of the 167 are currently on overseas short detachments (five to Kosovo, five to Bosnia, and one to East Timor).

There are no plans to increase specific SIB numbers due to the enactment of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill. However, planning for the implementation of the likely provisions of the Act once it has passed into law is under way, and current plans provide for an increase in the overall number of Royal Military Police (other than SIB). As that work progresses over the coming months, that number will be refined and confirmed.

The RAF

The following table shows the number of RAF personnel employed in the criminal investigation element of the RAF's Provost and Security Services (P&SS).

Location	*Number*
RAF Henlow (HQ)	34
RAF Cranwell	10
RAF Linton-on-Ouse	11
RAF Buchan	7
RAF Halton	11
RAF Innsworth	14
Rheindahlen	7
Cyprus	5
Gibraltar	1
Falkland Islands	1
Total	101

The RAF has no plans to expand the P&SS organisation following the enactment of the Armed Forces Discipline Bill.

Courts Martial Centres

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the locations of courts martial centres. [105650]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is as follows.

Naval Service

Portsmouth
Plymouth
Faslane
Yeovilton

Army

Aldershot
Bulford
Catterick
Colchester
Long Kesh, Northern Ireland
Hohne
Osnabruck
Gutersloh

RAF

The RAF does not have dedicated courts-martial centres. Individual courts-martial are normally held at the defendant's unit.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the change in the size of the Territorial Army was in each of the last six months. [103926]

Mr. Spellar: The change in size of the Territorial Army in each of the last six months for which figures are available was as follows:

	Number
1 December 1999	−314
1 November 1999	876
1 October 1999	−505
1 September 1999	−521
1 August 1999	−1,177
1 July 1999	−1,867

Note:
The above figures do not include non-regular permanent staff (NRPS).

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the total intake of new recruits to the Territorial Army was in each of the last six months. [103927]

Mr. Spellar: The total intake of new recruits to the Territorial Army in each of the last six months for which figures are available was as follows:

	Number
June 1999	517
July 1999	395
August 1999	471
September 1999	531
October 1999	1,779
November 1999	712

Note:
The above figures do not include non-regular permanent staff (NRPS).

MOD Hospital Units

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of *(a)* the value for money provided by Ministry of Defence hospital units and *(b)* their ability to meet future demands. [104416]

Mr. Spellar: A detailed study of the size and shape of the future operational requirements for medical support was carried out in 1995. This study endorsed the strategy of greater integration with the NHS mainly through the creation of Ministry of Defence Hospital Units. This integration has been shown to be more effective than previous arrangements, particularly in ensuring military medical staff receive the required training. A recent further review has endorsed the continuation of this policy to meet current and future demands for the delivery of secondary care.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer to the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) of 14 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 93W, if he will publish those data on sub-critical nuclear test experiments and the exchange of details between the United States and the United Kingdom, which have been made publicly available in the United States of America. [104727]

Mr. Hoon: We are not aware that US authorities have made public either the precise data obtained as a result of their sub-critical nuclear test experiments or details of any exchanges with the UK on the subject which are withheld here under the terms of Exemption Category 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. However, details of the intention to conduct such tests and a general description of their purpose have been published in the USA and on the Internet, for example at the US Department of Energy website http://www.doe.gov.

Operational Areas

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the areas in which British armed forces have been *(a)* deployed and *(b)* stationed since 1970 which (i) have and (ii) have not been designated as an operational area. [104812]

Mr. Spellar: Information on the many areas throughout the world in which elements of the British Armed Forces have been deployed and stationed since 1970 is available in the annual Statements on the Defence Estimates publications. However there is no centrally collated list covering all these locations or which of those were at the time designated as an operational area, and such a list could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

Cluster Bombs

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many cluster bombs were used by United Kingdom forces during the Kosovo campaign; and what is his estimate of the number of *(a)* sub-munitions within the cluster bombs that did not detonate on impact and *(b)* locations where there are undetonated sub-munitions. [104863]

Mr. Hoon: During Operation Allied Force, some 500 RBL 755 Cluster Bombs were dropped by the RAF against specific, identified, military targets.

The bomblets (sub-munitions) within cluster bombs are designed to detonate on impact, but as with any other similar munitions, a small percentage may fail to do so. The manufacturer's estimated failure rate for the RBL 755 cluster bombs used by the UK during the Kosovo campaign is approximately 5 per cent.

KFOR has now cleared over 7,400 cluster bomb munitions throughout Kosovo, in addition to some 6,100 Serbian anti-personnel mines and 3,400 anti-tank mines. All unexploded ordnance sites in the UK sector of Kosovo have now been marked and 90 per cent. of unexploded cluster bomb munitions cleared.

RAF Chilmark

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost since the closure of RAF Chilmark of *(a)* annual maintenance and *(b)* cleaning and preparing the site for disposal. [104801]

Mr. Spellar: The total cost of annual maintenance at RAF Chilmark since closure of the site in 1995 is in the order of £490,000. The cost of cleaning and preparing the site for sale in accordance with MOD policy has amounted to £371,460.

WALES

Farming

8. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the First Secretary to discuss farming in Wales. [103494]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a weekly basis and we discuss a range of issues, including farming in Wales.

Countryside (Access)

9. **Mr. Livsey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the Government's proposals for greater access to the countryside. [103495]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have received letters on this issue and I met the Country Landowners Association in October and the Countryside Council for Wales in December to discuss this and other issues.

Livestock Industry

10. **Mr. Paterson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on discussions he has had with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales on prospects for the Welsh livestock industry and their implications for the economy of cross-border areas. [103496]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a weekly basis and we discuss a range of issues, including the Welsh livestock industry. I am acutely aware of the long-term problems facing Welsh agriculture, which is heavily dependent on livestock, and the current difficulties.

A number of steps have been taken to address the difficulties faced by the farming community such as the package announced last September by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and measures introduced by the Assembly. However our priority must be to restructure the industry

to produce a stable, sustainable and prosperous future for Welsh farming and I know that this is something which the Assembly is working towards.

National Lottery

12. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the opportunities through national lottery funding for promoting cultural exchanges between Wales and Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany and the Isle of Man. [103499]

Mr. Hanson: The Secretary of State for Wales meets the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on a regular basis to discuss a number of issues, including cultural exchanges and the broad priorities for future distribution of lottery funding in Wales through the New Opportunities Fund.

He would welcome the development of cultural exchanges between Wales and Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall, Brittany and the Isle of Man, but it would be for the promoters of those exchanges to explore appropriate sources of funding.

Pensioners

13. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the impact on pensioners in Wales of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's pre-Budget Statement. [103500]

Mr. Hanson: The Secretary of State meets the First Secretary regularly, and was pleased to be able to inform him that the Chancellor's pre-Budget Statement guarantees the £100 fuel allowance every year for 585,000 Welsh pensioners, that the 230,000 Welsh pensioners who are over 75 will get free television licences, and that the Minimum Pension Guarantee will be up-rated in line with earnings instead of inflation.

Care Provision

14. **Ms Julie Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the Government's legislative programme and its impact on care provision in Wales. [103502]

23. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the impact on care provision of the Government's legislative programme. [103511]

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the Government's legislative programme and its impact on care provision in Wales. [103498]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have both had discussions with the First Secretary and Assembly members about the Government's legislative programme. The Bills that will impact on care provision in Wales have, of course, been included in these discussions.

National Assembly for Wales

15. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales on how many occasions he has attended and participated in the proceedings of the Assembly. [103503]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have attended and participated in one plenary session of the Assembly, the debate on the Government's legislative programme.

Transport

16. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the Government's legislative programme and its impact on transport in Wales. [103504]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular meetings with the First Secretary to discuss a wide range of issues including transport and its impact in Wales.

The introduction of the Transport Bill on 1 December 1999 shows the Government's continued commitment to provide an integrated transport policy for both England and Wales.

I am keen to ensure that the interests of Wales are fully met and will maintain dialogue with Cabinet colleagues and the Assembly.

European Union

17. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales on what occasions a Minister of the Welsh Executive has *(a)* accompanied a United Kingdom Minister for discussions with the European Union and *(b)* led on behalf of the UK at discussions with the European Union. [103505]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Under the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding and Concordat on Co-ordination of European Union Policy Issues between the United Kingdom Government, Scottish Ministers and the Cabinet of the National Assembly for Wales, Assembly Secretaries are eligible to form part of UK delegations to the Council of Ministers, by agreement. Decisions on Ministerial attendance, and on whether Ministers from the devolved administrations could speak on behalf of the UK in Council, are taken on a case by case basis by the lead Minister.

To date, no Assembly Secretary has done so. However, I understand that Assembly Secretaries are actively considering which Councils they will be seeking to attend in future.

Worldwide Web

18. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what new proposals he has to increase the use of the worldwide web by his Department. [103506]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have no immediate plans to increase the use of the Web by my Department.

Unitary Authorities

19. **Mr. Geraint Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the adequacy

of the size of individual unitary authorities in relation to *(a)* financial viability and *(b)* maintaining consistent standards of service delivery. [103507]

Mr. Hanson: I meet the Assembly Cabinet's Secretary for Local Government on a regular basis to ensure that I am well informed on local government in Wales. However, the adequacy of the size of individual unitary authorities in Wales is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales, to which responsibility for local government has been devolved.

SMEs

20. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the impact on small and medium-sized enterprises in Wales of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's pre-Budget Statement and the Government's legislative programme. [103508]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Secretary to discuss a variety of issues including SMEs. The First Secretary, the Government and I recognise the importance of SMEs to the Welsh economy and the UK as a whole. The Chancellor of the Exchequer's pre-Budget Statement unveiled plans for £45 million of enterprise grants to foster the growth of SMEs throughout the UK and represents the Government's continuing commitment to stimulate an already established enterprise culture.

21. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about United Kingdom assistance to small and medium-sized businesses. [103509]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary regularly and discuss a variety of issues, including assistance to small and medium-sized businesses. Measures giving assistance to small and medium-size businesses were announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer's last pre-budget statement. The introduction of funds for the UK is expected to be worth at least £125 million. These funds will provide welcome but necessary development and support to new and already established ventures.

Regulation

22. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the regulatory burden on businesses in Wales arising from primary legislation. [103510]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government will introduce the Regulatory Reform Bill this Session. This Bill will make provision to widen the deregulation order making power currently available under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994.

The National Assembly for Wales is being consulted on this and the Wales Office are working to ensure that burdens on business in Wales, as well as in England, stemming from inappropriate or excessive regulation can be tackled under the proposed new order-making power.

Information about the impact of all regulations—which is not held separately for primary and secondary legislation—is held centrally by the Cabinet Office Regulatory Impact Unit. It is not broken down for different areas of the UK but relates to the UK as a whole.

Students (Funding)

24. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the funding of students at Welsh universities. [103512]

Mr. Hanson: None.

Health Resources

25. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the outcome of his recent discussions with the First Minister on the allocation of health resources in Wales. [103513]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and I have regular discussions about the NHS in Wales with the First Secretary. These discussions often cover health resources, but it is for the Assembly to decide on the allocation of the resources in Wales.

Theatre

26. **Mr. Llew Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to discuss with the First Secretary issues relating to the theatre in education in Wales. [103514]

Mr. Hanson: Following the Adjournment debate on 1 December 1999, *Official Report*, columns 93–100WH, I have written to Tom Middlehurst, Assembly Secretary responsible for post-16 education and training, on this issue. The Secretary of State and I will decide whether further discussions with the First Secretary are required when we have had an opportunity to consider Mr. Middlehurst's reply.

Swansea Medical School

27. **Mr. Alan Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will discuss with the First Secretary the proposal to establish a Swansea Medical School in collaboration with the University of Wales College of Medicine. [103515]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and I have regular discussions with the First Secretary about health and education issues in Wales. Future discussions may include the proposals to establish a Swansea Medical School in collaboration with the University of Wales College of Medicine. I understand that, at this point, the Assembly, along with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, is still considering how the collaboration will work.

Deeside Industrial Park

28. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the problems surrounding the proposed extension to the Deeside industrial park. [103516]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I understand that a public and local inquiry by the Planning Inspectorate into the proposed extension to the Deeside Industrial Park will be undertaken shortly. The inquiry's findings and conclusions will be reported to the National Assembly for Wales, which will then determine this application.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105304]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department holds only one property, and it is fully occupied.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has discussed with Treasury Ministers the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit in Wales. [103497]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I regularly meet with colleagues in Whitehall and discuss a wide range of issues. I fully support the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit.

Post Offices

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Department of Trade and Industry on the potential effect of the proposed payment of benefits into bank accounts and the effect this may have on rural post offices in Wales. [105571]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I speak regularly with colleagues in Whitehall and we discuss a number of issues. My officials have had a number of discussions with their counterparts in the Department of Trade and Industry. I am fully aware of the planned move to an Automated Credit Transfer system that will assure a safer, modern and efficient way of paying benefits. In addition, the Prime Minister announced on 21 October 1999 that the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) in the Cabinet Office is to carry out a study on the Post Office network which will seek to identify the contribution made by post offices to the viability of local communities. Close independent monitoring of the post office network will ensure that proposed closures which would create significant problems of access to post office counter services, including in rural areas, are taken up with the Post Office, which will then be able to investigate how access needs can best be met.

SOCIAL SECURITY

State Second Pension

Gillian Merron: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he plans to publish the Government Actuary's report on the financial effects for the National Insurance Fund of the proposed state second pension. [106278]

Mr. Rooker: The report is being laid before Parliament today (Cm 4573).

Asbestos-related Diseases

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will ask the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council to consider whether lung cancer should be classified as a prescribed industrial disease in cases where significant asbestos-related work history is combined with unprotected exposure to asbestos dust; [104778]

(2) what advice he has received from the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council on the relationship between lung cancer and significant asbestos exposure in the absence of asbestosis; [104779]

(3) what reports he has received on the reliability and sensitivity of CT scans and Chest X-rays in indicating the presence of asbestos-related disease. [104826]

Mr. Bayley: The Industrial Injuries Advisory Council provide us with independent expert advice on the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit scheme. In their report "Asbestos Related Diseases" (Cm 3467 published in November 1996) the Council investigated thoroughly the prescription of asbestos-related diseases, including the relationship between lung cancer and asbestos exposure, and whether CT scans would be appropriate within this benefit scheme. The Council recommended certain changes that were beneficial to claimants, which were brought into effect from April 1997. The Council continues to carefully monitor research, studies, publications and scientific developments in relation to asbestos-related lung disease, as they do for the other prescribed diseases. The Council have made no recommendations to me about asbestos-related diseases since 1996, and we are confident that the Council would re-examine any issue if new scientific evidence emerged. They would then make recommendations, which we would consider carefully.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what support his Department offers to victims of *(a)* pneumoconiosis and *(b)* an asbestos-related disease. [104828]

Mr. Bayley: The Department provides financial support through the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit scheme, which gives no-fault compensation for disablement resulting from work as an employed earner, either as a result of an accident at work or through contracting certain prescribed occupational diseases. Pneumoconiosis (including asbestosis) and three other asbestos-related diseases are prescribed for this purpose. Other Social Security benefits, as appropriate in individual cases, would also be available depending on the person's circumstances.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has to improve the diagnosis of asbestos-related diseases, especially in areas with a high prevalence of such disease. [104827]

Mr. Bayley: We do not propose to change the method of diagnosis of asbestos-related disease for the purposes of the Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit scheme. Diagnosis methods are the same throughout Great Britain, and we are advised by the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council on appropriate criteria.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105311]

Angela Eagle: In early 1998, all of the Department's properties were transferred to the private sector under two separate Private Finance Initiative contracts. We now no longer own nor hold any property. Instead, serviced office accommodation is purchased from our two private sector partners, Trillium and the Newcastle Estate Partnership.

The deal which we negotiated with Trillium, the PRIME contract allowed us to hand back all of our "surplus" space, in both wholly and partly unoccupied buildings, to Trillium so that there is now no continuing cost to the Department. The Department also has the flexibility to vacate and hand back further space over the life of the contract, at nil cost, so it is extremely unlikely that we will have any surplus accommodation in the future. The only unoccupied space that is maintained is held for strategic reasons.

Benefit Payments (Post Offices)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received concerning the Government's plans to switch payments from benefits and pension books to bank transfers and the impact of this change on local post offices; and if he will make a statement. [106041]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) on 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 374W.

Basic State Pension

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost of restoring the link between the basic state pension and average earnings in the UK. [105250]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Estimated cost of uprating retirement pension by earnings from April 2000

£ million

	Gross Costs	*Net Costs*
With linked benefits		
2000–01	1,300	1,000
2010–11	8,500	7,500
Without linked benefits		
2000–01	1,100	850
2010–11	7,500	6,500

Notes:
1. Gross costs have been calculated by GAD. Net costs have been calculated using the 1999–2000 Policy Simulation and PENSIM models to take account of means-tested benefit offsets.
2. Estimates for the year 2000–01 have been rounded to the nearest 50 million, and for 2010–11 to the nearest 100 million. Estimates are in 1999 prices.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Property Sales

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what dates *(a)* Melbourne Place, Topcliffe Road, Sowerby, North Yorkshire, *(b)* the former RAF station at Strubby, Alford, Lincolnshire, *(c)* 4 Almondbank, Perth, *(d)* 5 Almondbank, Perth, *(e)* the Experimental Horticultural Station at Efford, Lymington, Hampshire and *(f)* Barnhall, Wickford, Essex, were offered for sale; and what is the current position with regard to the disposal of each property. [104682]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is as follows:

Property	
Melbourne Place, Topcliffe Road, Sowerby, North Yorkshire	Not yet offered for sale. Awaiting issue of Certificate of Lawfulness of Proposed Use or Development by the local planning authority. The site will be marketed thereafter
The former RAF Station at Strubby, Alford, Lincolnshire	First offered for sale in February 1995. Little interest from potential purchasers. The site was finally sold in July 1999
4 Almondbank Perth	First offered for sale in July 1996. Little interest from potential purchasers. Investigations are under way into the potential for redevelopment and discussions are taking place with the local planning authority
5 Almondbank Perth	Not yet offered for sale although part of the site was sold back to a former owner in 1996. Agents have advised that marketing of the site should be delayed until the position with regard to 4 Almondbank is clarified
The Experimental Horticultural Station at Efford, Lymington, Hampshire	Not offered for sale on the open market. Until recently this site was fully occupied by Horticulture Research International under the terms of a lease. They have recently surrendered the northern sector of the site to the Ministry. Part of this was sold in October 1999 to the successor of the former owner under the terms of the Crichel Down Rules. Contracts have been exchanged for the sale of the remainder to the same person on the same basis
Barnhall, Wickford, Essex	Not yet offered for sale. The Ministry is collaborating with the local authority which owns some adjacent land with a view to selling the MAFF land for development in due course

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what dates *(a)* the former Central Science Laboratory at London Road, Slough, *(b)* Greythorpe Road and 168 Sinclair Road, Aberdeen, *(c)* Tangley Place, Worplesdon, Guildford, *(d)* Pocklington Industrial Estate, East Yorkshire, *(e)* 130 Hyndford Road, Lanark and *(f)* Gravel Pit, Hertford Road, Hoddesdon, Hampshire, were offered for sale; and what is the current position with regard to the disposal of each property. [104683]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is as follows:

Property	
Central Science Laboratory, London Road, Slough	First offered for sale in November 1998. The property was sold in July 1999
Greythorpe Road and 168 Sinclair Road, Aberdeen	First offered for sale in August 1998. Missives will shortly be concluded, after which the purchaser will apply for detailed planning consent
Tangley Place, Worplesdon, Guildford	First offered for sale in January 1997. This property was sold in January 1999
Pocklington Industrial Estate, East Yorkshire	First offered for sale in June 1997. This property was sold in June 1998
130 Hyndford Road, Lanark	First offered for sale in January 1995. This property was sold in February 1998
Gravel Pit, Hertford Road, Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire	First offered for sale in January 1995. Sale delayed while appropriate planning consents were sought and access problems resolved. This property was sold in October 1999

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what dates the properties at *(a)* Tattenhall Road, Tattenhall, Chester, *(b)* Little Glen Road, Glen Parva, Leicester, *(c)* Kendal Road, Harlescott, Shrewsbury, *(d)* Trentside, Gunthorpe, Nottingham, *(e)* Caton Road, Claughton, Lancaster and *(f)* Nant Alyn Road, Rhydymwyn, Mold, Flint, were offered for sale; and what is the current position with regard to the disposal of each property. [104684]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is as follows:

Property	
Tattenhall Road, Tattenhall, Chester	First offered for sale in August 1995. Planning difficulties resulted in the sale being postponed. Currently let on short term lease pending re-assessment of development potential
Little Glen Road, Glen Parva, Leicester	First offered for sale in July 1995. First prospective purchaser unwilling to agree detailed terms. Contract for sale with new purchaser about to be exchanged
Kendal Road, Harlescott, Shrewsbury	First offered for sale in January 1997. Currently awaiting outcome of appeal against refusal to grant planning consent. When this is known the site will be re-marketed
Trentside, Gunthorpe, Nottingham	Not offered for sale on the open market. Negotiations under way for a sale to the successors of the former owners under the terms of the Crichel Down Rules
Caton Road, Claughton, Lancaster	First offered for sale in February 1996. Little realistic interest from potential purchasers. Offer to purchase has recently been accepted and legal documentation is now being prepared
Nant Alyn Road, Rhydymwyn, Mold, Flint	Not yet offered for sale. The site is believed to be contaminated as a result of the use made of it during the last war. The need for decontamination is being assessed

Chlormequat

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the use of chlormequat in the United Kingdom *(a)* over the last five years and *(b)* at present. [103292]

Ms Quin: Chlormequat is approved for use in the UK on various cereal and oilseed crops, beans, peas and ornamental plants. Data on pesticide usage in the UK are collected by the Pesticide Usage Survey Group (PUSG), within the Government's Central Science Laboratory.

The PUSG's data for 1995 to 1998 show that around 98 per cent. of chlormequat use in the UK is on cereal crops. This is equivalent to approximately 2.7 million hectares treated per year. The detailed figures for cereals and the other crops on which use is approved are given in PUSG reports numbers 136, 141, 151–153 and 159, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the House. Results for 1999 are still being gathered and processed.

Government surveys of pesticide residues in food, conducted under the guidance of the Working Party on Pesticides Residues (WPPR), have suggested that there has been some unproved use of chlormequat on fruiting pear trees in the UK by a minority of growers. An enforcement programme has been put into place. Results from surveys in 1995, 1997 and 1998 can be found in the WPPR reports for those years. Results from the first six months of 1999 were published in November via a pesticides residues monitoring information sheet. A copy of this and the WPPR reports for 1995 to 1998 are available in the Libraries of the House.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Human Rights

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what written material on the Human Rights Act 1998 has been prepared for judges; and if he will place copies in the Library. [103830]

Mr. Lock: The Judicial Studies board for Northern Ireland has held five lectures on several European Conventions on Human Rights topics since February 1998. The following material was provided:

Incorporation of the ECHR—The right hon. Lord Irvine of Lairg.

The Human Rights Bill: Its effect on Criminal Proceedings—Ben Emmerson

The European Convention on Human Rights (as amended by Protocol No. 11) booklet—European Treaty Series, No. 5.

The Human Rights Act and Commercial Law—Michael Smyth.

ECHR and Judicial Review, Briefing Public Policy—Incorporation of the ECHR—The Implications for Business—Murray Hunt.

The Board's programme for 1999–2000 includes a series of three case study events covering civil law, family law and criminal law. A comprehensive pack of reading materials (including case studies, publications and other reading materials) have been issued, in order that the judiciary may prepare for the seminars. The materials included in the pack are as follows:

The Margin of Appreciation, The 'Horizontal' Application of Human Rights and Proportionality—the right hon. Lord Justice Sedley.

The Human Rights Act and the Civil Courts—Richard Plender QC.

Human Rights Act 1998 (Blackstone's)—John Wadham and Helen Mountfield.

Human Rights Law and Practice—Chapters 1 & 2 of Lester and Pannick (Butterworths).

Family Law and the Human Rights Act 1998—Michael Horowitz QC, Michael Nicholls and Geoffrey Kingcote.

Archbold Chapter 16—Ben Emmerson.

Civil Law, Family Law and Criminal Law case studies and Notes of Cases relevant to the Syndicate Exercises.

In addition, steps are being taken to ensure the availability of European Convention on Human Rights case law and textbooks in all court offices before the Act is commenced and the Northern Ireland Court Service intranet will have a Human Rights section which will permit the judiciary access to Northern Ireland judgments, judgments from England and Wales and Scotland and access to Human Rights websites. The purchase of subscription based Human Rights internet products is also being considered.

A complete set of the material issued to date by the Judicial Studies Board for Northern Ireland has been placed in the Library.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the budget is for judicial training in Northern Ireland on the Human Rights Act 1998. [103829]

Mr. Lock: Following the Comprehensive Spending Review allocation, the Northern Ireland Court Service received (in the 1999–2000 financial year) £100,000 to fund judicial training on the Human Rights Act 1998. The allocation was in addition to the Judicial Studies Board annual budget of £30,000, a substantial proportion of which has been used during the years 1998–99 and 1999–2000 to fund the Board's programme of Human Rights Act training.

Consolidated Legislation

Mr. Key: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department in each year since 1991 how many *(a)* Parliamentary Counsel, *(b)* senior draftsmen and *(c)* other draftsmen have been engaged at the Law Commission on consolidation work. [105646]

Mr. Lock: The numbers of Parliamentary Counsel on secondment to the Law Commission, other senior draftsmen employed at the Commission and other draftsmen seconded to, or employed at, the Commission engaged on consolidation in each complete year since 1991 are as follows:

	Parliamentary counsel	*Other senior draftsmen*	*Other draftsmen*
1992	4	1	2
1993	3	1	2
1994	2	1	4
1995	1	1	5
1996	2	1	5
1997	1	0	4
1998	1	0	4
1999	0	0	3

Service Discipline Acts

Mr. Key: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress has been made in the consolidation of the three Service Discipline Acts commenced in July 1991; and when he expects the work to be completed. [105645]

Mr. Lock: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer given to him on 8 June 1999, *Official Report*, column 318W. Consideration is now being given to the approach to the consolidation of the Acts, in the light of changes to them envisaged in the current Armed Forces Discipline Bill and the probability of further change in the next Armed Forces Bill, and in the light of plans for a tri-Service Act.

Magistrates

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average age of the magistrates who sit on the *(a)* Barnsley and *(b)* Doncaster bench. [105168]

Jane Kennedy: The average age of the magistrates who sit on the Barnsley and Doncaster benches is 55 for each.

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many *(a)* women and *(b)* disabled magistrates sit on the (i) Barnsley and (ii) Doncaster bench. [105167]

Jane Kennedy: There are currently 66 women on the Barnsley bench and 89 on the Doncaster bench. No formal records are kept of those who are disabled on either the Barnsley or the Doncaster benches.

Judges (Conduct)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list for the period since May 1997 the cases he has investigated involving the conduct of individual Judges and the action taken as a result. [105335]

Jane Kennedy: The principle of judicial independence, which is central to our constitutional arrangements, means that it is not open to the Lord Chancellor or his Department to consider complaints about judicial decisions. However, as Head of the Judiciary the Lord Chancellor does consider complaints about the personal conduct of individual Judges and other judicial office holders. The names of the complainant and the Judge are confidential. However, in the period between August 1998 (when new internal arrangements for handling such complaints came into force) and December 1999, the Lord Chancellor received a total of 3,903 complaints about members of the judiciary. The majority of these related to judicial decisions. Of the remainder, 367 related to personal conduct and were taken forward for investigation by seeking the complainants's consent for the complaint to be copied to the Judge. In 282 cases, consent was received and the Lord Chancellor then approached the Judge concerned for his or her response to the allegations and relayed these to the complainant. On 13 occasions, he saw fit to take further action, either by writing to the Judge or by arranging for him or her to be seen by officials. Comparable figures for the period before August 1998 are unavailable.

Departmental Consultation

Mr. Fraser: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what bodies his Department has consulted on each of its programmes since May 1997. [105242]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department consult widely on proposals across the diverse range of policies for which it is responsible. There is no central record of consultees, and one could be assembled only at disproportionate expense.

Northern Ireland Court Service

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many people have been promoted within the Northern Ireland Court Service in each of the last three years; and what is the religious breakdown of such promotions. [105345]

Mr. Lock: I refer the hon. Member to the following table:

	Number of promotions	*Protestant*	*Roman Catholic*
1997	11	9	2
1998	0	0	0
1999	6	4	2

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many people are employed in the Northern Ireland Court Service. [105324]

Mr. Lock: There are 668 people employed in the Northern Ireland Court Service.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the current religious breakdown at all levels of staff in the Northern Ireland Court Service; what were the figures for *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1995 and *(c)* 1997; and if he will make a statement. [105344]

Mr. Lock: For the purposes of consistency and fair comparison the Equality Commission requires all organisations to present their data in Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) Groups.

The table represents the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) Groups used by the Northern Ireland Court Service and shows the religious breakdown for each SOC Group within the Northern Ireland Court Service for 1999, 1997, 1995 and 1992.

The Community Background information is presented in terms of Numbers within the Organisation (NO).

These numbers are then shown both as a percentage within the Organisation as a whole (% Org) and as a percentage within each SOC Group (% SOC).

The following notable trends are apparent from the table:

The representation of Roman Catholics in SOC 1 has increased from 25 per cent. to 30 per cent. since 1992.

The representation of Roman Catholics has also increased in the Recruitment Grad (SOC 4) by 5 per cent. since 1997.

SOC 6 and 9 are mainly representative of our Security Grades and we continue to work with the Equality Commission towards fair participation.

Religious breakdown by Standard Occupational Classification (SOC)

	1999			*1997*			*1995*			*1992*		
	NO	*ORG (%)*	*SOC (%)*	*NO*	*ORG (%)*	*SOC (%)*	*NO*	*ORG (%)*	*SOC (%)*	*NO*	*ORG (%)*	*SOC (%)*
SOC1—Managers and Administrators												
Protestant	182	27	69	191	29	69	198	29	70	192	28	72
Roman Catholic	78	12	30	78	12	28	79	11	28	66	9.5	25
Non Determined	4	6	1	6	9	2	7	1	2	9	1.3	3
SOC2—Professional Staff												
Protestant	4	6	57	2	3	50	1	1	50	—	—	—
Roman Catholic	3	4	43	2	3	50	1	1	50	—	—	—
Non Determined	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SOC3—Associated Professional												
Protestant	1	15	100	1	1	100	2	0.3	100	—	—	—
Roman Catholic	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Non Determined	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Religious breakdown by Standard Occupational Classification (SOC)

	1999			1997			1995			1992		
	NO	ORG (%)	SOC (%)	NO	ORG (%)	SOC (%)	NO	ORG (%)	SOC (%)	NO	ORG (%)	SOC (%)
SOC 4—Clerical and Secretarial												
Protestant	192	29	62	186	28	64	193	28	66	155	22	61
Roman Catholic	105	16	34	84	13	29	88	13	30	74	11	29
Non Determined	13	2	4	21	3	7	13	1.9	4	27	3.9	10
SOC6—Personal and Protective												
Protestant	18	2.7	75	21	3	75	25	3.6	78	26	3.7	72
Roman Catholic	4	6	16	3	4	11	2	.3	6	3	0.4	8
Non Determined	2	3	8	4	6	14	5	.7	16	7	1	19
SOC9—Others												
Protestant	49	7.3	79	52	7.8	75	54	7.8	74	85	12	64
Roman Catholic	8	1.2	13	8	1.2	12	10	1.4	14	18	2.6	14
Non Determined	5	0.7	8	9	1.3	13	9	1.3	12	29	4.2	22

HEALTH

Haloperidol

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if Haloperidol is available for prescription on the NHS; what steps he has taken to ensure adequate supplies of Haloperidol; and if he will make a statement. [104625]

Ms Stuart: Haloperidol is available for prescription on the National Health Service. We have received no reports of supplies being inadequate.

Health Call Service

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) who assesses the quality control of the out-of-hours Health Call service for Medway-Swale; [104692]

(2) what was the average call-out time for the Health Call service for Sittingbourne and Sheppey in the last year for which figures are available; [104694]

(3) how many on-call doctors there are for Sittingbourne and Sheppey in the out-of-hours Health Call service. [104693]

Ms Stuart: Seventeen doctors are registered with Health Call, which covers the out-of-hours service for Sheppey. The average call out time is just under one hour and everyone is seen within two hours.

All 28 General Practitioners in the Sittingbourne area are registered with Medway Doctors On Call (MedDoc). Call-outs are assessed by a nurse triage and are prioritised according to clinical need.

The patient's GP is responsible for ensuring the quality of care for the patient. Complaints can be made about out-of-hours either directly to the out-of-hours service or via the patients GP. GPs have a contract with the out-of-hours service to provide a certain quality of care. Any complaints are managed through the National Health Service complaints procedure. Where the complainants are not happy with the response they receive through local resolution they will be given the opportunity to write to the local health authority for an independent review.

Isle of Sheppey Hospital

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will extend the minor injuries clinic hours at the hospital on the Isle of Sheppey to 9 pm. [104691]

Ms Stuart: The plans to extend the opening hours of the minor injuries clinic at the hospital on the Isle of Sheppey are currently a matter for discussion between the West Kent Health Authority and Thames Gateway National Health Service Trust.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many Jehovah's Witnesses died as a result of refusing medically advised blood transfusions in each of the last five years. [104764]

Mr. Denham: We do not hold this information centrally. Clinicians are required by law to respect the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses who do not wish to receive blood transfusions. In some cases, there are acceptable alternative medical interventions. For instance, for surgical operations, we asked NHS Trusts to consider the introduction of perioperative cell salvage by March 2000. This process retrieves the patient's own blood cells during surgery, which may be acceptable to some Jehovah's Witnesses.

West Sussex Waiting Lists

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people were on the NHS waiting list for treatment in the West Sussex Health Authority area on *(a)* 1 November 1999 and *(b)* 1 December 1999. [104888]

Mr. Denham: The latest figures available show that as at the end of November there were 19,783 people on the National Health Service waiting list for treatment in the West Sussex Health Authority area.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people had been waiting for 13 weeks or more for a first appointment with a consultant in the West Sussex Health Authority area on *(a)* 1 November 1999 and *(b)* 1 December 1999. [104887]

Mr. Denham: The number of people waiting for 13 weeks or more for an outpatient appointment by health authority area is monitored on a quarterly basis. The last available figures for West Sussex are as at 30 September. At that date, there were 8,350 people waiting 13 weeks or more for a first outpatient appointment.

Flu

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact on hospital waiting list targets of the recent influenza outbreak. [104898]

Mr. Denham: During the winter, and particularly over the extended Millennium holiday, the National Health Service has quite rightly focused its attention on the high numbers of emergency cases, including those resulting from the current influenza outbreak. At this time of year, the NHS plans to treat fewer waiting list cases because of expected pressures, and the waiting list normally increases slightly. A seasonal rise in waiting lists is expected over the next couple of months, reflecting the planned priority the NHS has given to winter emergency admissions. This will not affect the achievement of the waiting list target.

Dyspraxia

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many children have been diagnosed as dyspraxic since May 1997. [104860]

Mr. Denham: There were 62 admissions for dyspraxia by age (0–16 years) in National Health Service hospitals in England for the financial year 1997–98.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many primary care groups have applied to become primary care trusts. [105506]

Mr. Denham: Primary care trust applications are locally driven. We have received 63 applications (covering 68 primary care groups) to move to PCT status in April and October 2000. A further 140 PCGs have expressed interest in moving to PCT status from April.

Correspondence

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Harborough of 22 November 1999, on behalf of Mr. L. W. Bennett of Oadby, Leicestershire. [105789]

Mr. Hutton: I replied to the hon. Member on 17 January.

Dentistry (Waiting Times)

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the *(a)* average and *(b)* maximum waiting times have been for treatment for patients using each of the first two dental access centres. [104776]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* The information is not available in the form requested. However, at the Cornwall dentist access centre, protocol is that people presenting with a dental emergency are seen on the same day or the following day. At the Shropshire dental access centre, protocol in both cases is that a patient with a swollen face will be seen the same day and that patients presenting with pains, considering themselves to be in need of urgent treatment, are seen within 24 hours. Patients with minor ailments and suffering no pain will be seen within a week.

Departmental Property

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105313]

Ms Stuart: The Department, including its agencies, has no properties which are wholly or mainly unoccupied.

TREASURY

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105309]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information is given in the table.

Location	*Date unoccupied*
Buildings wholly unoccupied:	
Inland Revenue	
Bradford	7 July 1997
Glasgow	1 June 1999
Southampton	29 September 1999
HM Customs and Excise	
Hull	1 August 1996
Lisburn	28 February 1997
Newcastle	14 August 1998
St. Albans	31 August 1996
Southend-on-Sea	4 October 1999
Weymouth	1 March 1997
Valuation Office Agency	
Eastbourne	May 1999
Office for National Statistics	
Fareham	August 1999
Building mainly unoccupied:	
Inland Revenue	
Poole	1 April 1996
Valuation Office Agency	
Doncaster	November 1998
Leamington Spa	April 1999

Company Voluntary Arrangement

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the implications of a company becoming the subject of a company voluntary arrangement under the Insolvency Act for that company's ability to compete for public contracts. [105296]

Mr. Timms: Companies which become the subject of a company voluntary arrangement under the Insolvency Act 1986 would not automatically be barred from bidding for public contracts. The objective in public procurement is to secure value for money, having due regard to propriety and regularity. To achieve this, purchasers need to assess the financial and economic standing of potential bidders and to satisfy themselves that they meet the

requirements for the particular contract. Where the EC rules apply there is specific provision which allows purchasers to exclude potential bidders who have an arrangement of this type. It is for the purchasing authority to decide whether to rely upon this provision in any competition.

Child Care Tax Credit

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of *(a)* the uptake of the child care tax credit by parents with children below the age of one year in a steady state and *(b)* the cost of providing that credit. [104864]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is estimated that in 2000–01, the first full year of the Working Families Tax Credit, about 11,000 families with children aged under one will have eligible child care costs for at least one child and will hence be in receipt of the child care tax credit. It is not possible to identify the cost of child care for children aged under one but, if these families no longer received the child care tax credit for any of their children, the cost of the Working Families Tax Credit would reduce by about £35 million.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list by constituency the *(a)* number and *(b)* proportion of households with at least one member in work and qualifying for Working Families Tax Credit which are receiving Working Families Tax Credit in the UK, ranked in descending order of the proportion of households. [104917]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I regret that the information requested is not available.

LSVTs

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much has been raised annually from stamp duty on large-scale voluntary transfers in each of the last five years. [104795]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Transfers of properties to charities are exempt from stamp duty. About three-quarters of registered social landlords are charities, but figures are not readily available on the amount of stamp duty paid on large-scale voluntary transfers from local authorities to non-charitable registered social landlords.

Employment Statistics

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women in each of the standard age groups were employed in his Department in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1999. [104017]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Details of staff in post in the Treasury on 1 April 1999, broken down by gender and standard age group, are provided in the table. Information on this basis for 1979 is not available. The annual publication "Civil Service Statistics" provides a departmental breakdown of staff by gender for the year in question and service-wide information by age. Information on average age by responsibility level and gender is also provided in the "Equal Opportunities Data Summary 1998".

HM Treasury staff by gender and age as at 1 April 1999

Age group	*Men*	*Women*
15–19	2	1
20–24	45	28
25–29	95	77
30–34	119	64
35–39	85	52
40–44	77	50
45–49	63	34
50+	84	69
Total	570	375

EU Fraud

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the level of fraud and irregularities reported by the United Kingdom in 1998 under Regulations 1681/94 and 1831/94, set out in Official Journal C350, 3 December 1999, page 97, with reference to the increase in sums involved. [105670]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The increase in the level of Structural Funds fraud and irregularities reported by the United Kingdom in 1998 is primarily the result of specific efforts to improve detection and reporting systems during this period, and the detection of two substantial fraud cases.

It is essential that Structural Fund moneys are spent properly and efficiently, and that frauds and irregularities are detected and dealt with appropriately. We are continuing to improve financial control and management systems towards this end.

EU Tax Harmonisation

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 318W, if he will list those elements of tax harmonisation which have been identified by member states. [105613]

Dawn Primarolo: My answer of 2 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 318W, concerned Council discussions on tackling harmful tax competition.

Charitable Giving

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how the extent of charitable giving is calculated; how much charitable giving there was in *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1978 and *(c)* 1988; and how the age, gender, race and occupational profile of charitable giving has changed over this period. [105476]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Information on the full extent of charitable giving is not available from administrative sources. The Charities Aid Foundation estimates overall income donated by individuals to be around £5 billion to £6 billion per year. Research on donations to charities by individuals or households has been carried out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies

(using the Family Expenditure Survey), and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, from which further details are available.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the level of preparedness for the introduction of the Euro among *(a)* small and medium-sized enterprises and *(b)* other enterprises on (i) 30 June 1999 and (ii) 31 December 1999. [105814]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury has commissioned a number of surveys of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to measure the level of euro preparations across the UK. The most recent survey, carried out in April 1999, shows 27 per cent. of SMEs with European Union trading links had prepared for the euro.

The Treasury does not carry out euro preparations surveys of larger companies. The surveys focus on SMEs because they are the prime target of the Treasury's euro preparations information campaign to help businesses prepare for the euro.

Taxpayers (Shropshire)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many taxpayers there are in *(a)* Shrewsbury and Atcham and *(b)* Shropshire. [105524]

Dawn Primarolo: The latest estimates for the number of income tax payers in Shrewsbury and Atcham and in Shropshire are 47,000 and 204,000 respectively. The estimate for Shrewsbury and Atcham is uncertain because of the small survey sample size.

These estimates are for 1996–97 and are based on the Inland Revenue Survey of Personal Incomes.

Government Debt

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the *(a)* nominal and *(b)* market value of central Government gross debt was on the latest date for which information is available. [105838]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Matthew Taylor, dated 19 January 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on central government gross debt.

Monthly data for the nominal value of central government gross debt are published in Table 18 of the Bank of England publication Monetary and Financial Statistics (the December 1999 edition providing data up to end-November 1999). At end-November 1999, it was £388.7 billion.

The market value of central government gross debt can be estimated from Quarterly balance sheet data published as part of the National Accounts dataset (in Financial Statistics and United Kingdom Economic Accounts). Market value of central government gross debt at end-1999 Q3 was £427.1 billion (nominal value at that date was £395 billion).

Winter Deaths

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 436W, on winter deaths, if he will assess the contribution of influenza and related conditions to the statistics for excess winter deaths. [105432]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 19 January 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question, pursuant to my answer of 20th December, Official Report, column 436W, on winter deaths, to assess the contribution of influenza and related conditions to the statistics for excess winter deaths.

A breakdown of deaths by influenza, and other selected causes, is given in the attached table for the last five winters for which final figures are available. Influenza activity is known to lead to an increase in respiratory deaths generally, and not just influenza deaths.

The figures presented are for all deaths occurring in England and Wales. These include deaths of non-residents, which were not included in the regional figures provided in the previous response.

Excess winter deaths are defined by ONS as the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

Excess winter deaths by underlying cause of death, England and Wales, winter 1993–94 to winter 1997–98

	1997–98	*1996–97*	*1995–96*	*1994–95*	*1993–94*
Number of deaths					
All causes	22,900	47,680	40,190	27,290	25,900
Influenza	30	370	250	50	110
Pneumonia	5,800	15,290	11,080	6,260	6,550
Acute respiratory infections	80	180	150	100	110
Other respiratory diseases	3,850	7,640	6,320	3,950	3,830
Other causes	13,150	24,200	22,400	16,930	15,300
Percentage of total deaths					
All causes	100	100	100	100	100
Influenza	0	1	1	0	0
Pneumonia	25	32	28	23	25
Acute respiratory infections	0	0	0	0	0
Other respiratory diseases	17	16	16	14	15
Other causes	57	51	56	62	59

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 20 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 436W, on excess winter deaths, if he will provide a breakdown by age for each year of data. [105431]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 19 January 2000:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question, pursuant to my answer of 20 December 1999, Official Report, column 436W, on excess winter deaths, to provide a breakdown by age for each year of data.

The information requested is provided in the attached table for all deaths occurring in England and Wales. These figures include deaths of non-residents, which were not included in the regional figures provided in the previous response.

Excess winter deaths are defined by ONS as the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

Excess winter mortality, winter 1988–89 to winter 1997–98, England and Wales

Year	*0–64*	*65–74*	*75–84*	*85+*	*All ages*
1988–89	1,720	4,260	8,090	7,100	21,160
1989–90	3,930	8,580	18,510	16,180	47,200
1990–91	2,960	7,070	14,660	13,250	37,940
1991–92	2,740	6,360	13,500	12,250	34,850
1992–93	2,120	4,720	9,330	9,490	25,650
1993–94	2,120	4,160	9,290	10,330	25,900
1994–95	2,200	5,490	9,700	9,910	27,290
1995–96	2,900	7,070	14,370	15,850	40,190
1996–97	3,040	6,970	17,540	20,140	47,680
1997–98	1,700	4,200	7,870	9,130	22,900

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 20 January 2000

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Horizon Working Group

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the report of the Horizon Working Group on post office business issues submitted to the Cabinet Office in December 1999; and if he will make a statement. [104724]

Mr. Byers: The document concerned represents work in progress and contains commercially sensitive information.

Post Offices

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many post offices there were in *(a)* Somerset and *(b)* the Yeovil constituency in each year from 1980 to 1999; and if he will make a statement. [104748]

Mr. Byers: I understand from the Post Office that they do not hold historic information on the numbers of post offices in each parliamentary constituency or local administrative area and that such information cannot readily be compiled.

The Post Office advise that in October 1999 the number of post offices in Somerset was 234 and in the Yeovil constituency was 42.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals are being considered by his Department to help sustain and develop the viability of rural and urban sub-post offices. [105859]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government are making a substantial contribution to the costs of automating the entire post office counters network to strengthen the viability of the network as a whole. Automation will enable Post Office Counters Ltd. to offer substantial enhancements to the services it is able to offer to clients and customers which in turn will increase the attractiveness of post offices compared with other service delivery channels. In addition, the Performance and Innovation Unit in the Cabinet Office is carrying out an urgent study on the post office network.

Lord Archer

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under which section of the Companies Act 1985 he asked officials to investigate Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare in 1999. [106005]

Mr. Byers: I have never asked my officials to investigate Lord Archer of Weston-super-Mare.

Newspapers

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will prevent recent proposed changes in the ownership of newspapers circulating in Wales. [105423]

Dr. Howells: I understand that the question refers to the proposal by Trinity Mirror plc ("Trinity Mirror") to acquire the newspapers and related assets of News Communications & Media plc. Under section 58 of the Fair Trading Act 1973, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's prior written consent is required before such an acquisition is made. I announced on 21 December that I was referring Trinity Mirror's application for consent to the Competition Commission. The reference, which was mandatory under the terms of the Act, does not prejudge the issues involved. The Competition Commission will investigate and report their findings to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State by 13 March 2000.

Soya Imports

Joan Ruddock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much soya was imported from the USA to the UK in *(a)* 1996, *(b)* 1997, *(c)* 1998 and *(d)* 1999. [106092]

Mr. Caborn: The available information is as follows:

UK imports of soya from the USA

£000

SITC/CN/Description	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*[1]
08131 Oil cake and residues of soya beans	15,635	34,487	28,836	12,645
22220 Soya beans	77,892	86,232	71,054	20,329
120810000 Flours and meals of soya beans	32	21	16	19
42111 Crude soya bean oil	1	0	47	96
42119 Refined soya bean oil	25	32	22	1
Total	93,585	120,772	99,975	33,090

[1] January-November

Source:

Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Customs and Excise

National Assembly for Wales

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what training staff in his Department have received on the implications of the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales on their work in giving advice in response to inquiries. [106070]

Mr. Caborn: Information and guidance on the implications of devolution on the work of the Department, including handling of correspondence and inquiries, has been promulgated to staff throughout the Department and placed on the Department's intranet. In addition, a number of seminars have been held to provide information to staff

and to encourage discussion on the effect of devolution on their responsibilities. I have also written to all senior officials in DTI to remind them of the need to work with the devolved administrations in accordance with the arrangements set out in the Memorandum of Understanding and concordats (Command Paper Cm 4444, published on 1 October 1999) and in a bilateral concordat between DTI and the National Assembly for Wales which I expect to be published shortly.

Regional Assistance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects the new EU regional assistance map for the UK to be agreed. [106078]

Mr. Caborn: Discussions with the Commission on the proposals for new Assisted Areas are continuing. We will announce the new map as soon as possible.

Coal Miners (Compensation)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the payment of compensation to ex-coalminers and their widows in respect of emphysema and chronic bronchitis includes an element of compensation for pain and suffering; and if he will make a statement. [106074]

Mrs. Liddell: Compensation for successful claims in respect of chronic bronchitis and emphysema includes general damages for pain, suffering and loss of amenity.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105307]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 19 January 2000]:* The information is as follows:

(a) None.

(b) Three.

(i) *Lime Grove, Eastcote, Middlesex*

My Department vacated this site in late 1998. Part of the site, however, continues to be occupied by US Forces personnel and my officials are therefore exploring a transfer of site responsibility to the Ministry of Defence.

(ii) *Dee Hills Park, Chester*

(iii) *Gordon House, Rochester*

These freehold properties were vacated on 6 December 1999 and 9 January 2000 respectively. Sales of both are expected to be completed shortly.

Glassmaking

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the manufacturing capacity of glassmaking in the UK, expressed in tonnes per day. [104766]

Mr. Alan Johnson: This Department has responsibility only for the lead crystal, container, scientific/technical and automotive glassware sectors. No such assessment of the manufacturing capacity in these industries has been undertaken.

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the medium-term demand for manufactured glass in Britain. [104765]

Mr. Alan Johnson: This Department has responsibility only for the lead crystal, container, scientific/technical and automotive glassware sectors. No such assessment of the medium-term demand for manufactured glass in Britain has been undertaken. However, independent reports suggest that the UK glassware market is being increasingly influenced by fashion and design as part of the general trend towards casual dining which has increased the demand for glassware products.

Gas-fired Power Stations

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the economic impact of the moratorium on gas-fired power stations, including the direct and indirect impact on employment. [105160]

Mrs. Liddell: I am monitoring carefully the economic impact of the Government's policy of stricter consents for gas-fired power stations. In particular, I have received representations about the impact of the policy on proposals for industrial regeneration in local economies and the impact on employment in the oil and gas, power generation equipment and other sectors. However, the policy is necessary, as a temporary measure, to protect security and diversity of supply while the electricity market is reformed. It will be relaxed as soon as the reform programme has been undertaken and the distortions in the market have been removed.

Business Rates (North-West)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent discussions have taken place between his Department and the DETR about reducing business rates in the North-West. [105272]

Mr. Caborn: There have not been any discussions between the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions specifically about a reduction in business rates in the North-West. However, my Department has been involved in discussions about the arrangements for transitional relief and is also involved in the Government review of the system of revaluation of non-domestic rates in England.

BSkyB and Cable

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Office of Fair Trading's investigation into BSkyB and cable. [105261]

Dr. Howells: The decision to undertake a competition review of BSkyB's position in pay television is a matter for the Director General of Fair Trading.

Petrol Sales

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will investigate the prospects for independent petrol retailers. [105269]

Dr. Howells: DTI Ministers have no plans to investigate this particular market sector. In so far as there are any possible competition issues, it would be for the Director General of Fair Trading to investigate.

The Director General last looked at the petrol market in 1998. He found that independent petrol retailers had suffered as a result of strong competition between the oil companies and the supermarkets, but overall the market was competitive and consumers were benefiting.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he investigates regional monopolies of the sale of petrol by oil companies. [105270]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition legislation, responsibility for investigating allegations of anti-competitive practices, abuse of monopoly position and restrictive trade practices lies with the Director General of Fair Trading.

Any evidence of abuse of monopoly position, on a regional or national basis, should be passed to the Director General of Fair Trading.

Agency Banking Services

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to encourage the major clearing banks to agree agency banking services with Post Office Counters. [105330]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Government have taken steps to put back on track the Horizon project to automate the post office network thereby establishing a platform for provision of on-line agency banking services at all post offices. However the extension of the provision of agency banking services at post offices is primarily a matter for commercial negotiation between the clearing banks and Post Office Counters Ltd.

Coal Industry

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what were the total tonnages of coal delivered to power stations in Great Britain in 1999, giving the breakdown between *(a)* collieries in England, Scotland and Wales and *(b)* deep mines and opencast. [105513]

Mrs. Liddell: Figures for 1999 as a whole are not yet available, but in the first three quarters of 1999 it is estimated that of the 24 million tonnes of coal delivered from collieries and opencast sites in Great Britain to UK power stations, about 15 million tonnes came from England, four million tonnes came from Scotland and less than one million tonnes from Wales with a further four million tonnes from small producers that cannot be readily allocated geographically. Of the 24 million tonnes about 13 million tonnes was deep mined and about 11 million tonnes opencast and recovered coal.

A further five million tonnes of imported coal were reported by power stations in the first three quarters of 1999.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much coal was imported into the United Kingdom in 1999 *(a)* in total and *(b)* from each country supplying coal to the United Kingdom. [105514]

Mrs. Liddell: Figures for 1999 as a whole are not yet available, but in the first three quarters of 1999, it is estimated that 14.6 million tonnes of coal were imported into the UK.

Coal imported[1] into UK, January to September 1999

Country	*Thousand tonnes*
Belgium/Luxembourg	41
France	2
Germany	12
Irish Republic	39
Netherlands	136
Total EU[2]	230
Australia	4,336
Canada	1,331
China	219
Colombia	2,603
Indonesia	50
Mozambique	19
Norway	21
Poland	975
Russia	83
South Africa	2,101
USA	2,107
Venezuela	435
Vietnam	114
Total Non EU	14,392
Total all countries	14,622

[1] Country of origin basis.

[2] Imports from EU countries include coal from outside the EC routed through these countries.

Electricity Cabling

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of electricity supply cabling in urban areas of England is over *(a)* 25 years, *(b)* 35 years and *(c)* 50 years old. [105665]

Mrs. Liddell: Separate figures are not available for England. Percentages for Great Britain are as follows:

Age	*Percentage*
Over 25 years old	75
Over 35 years old	52
Over 50 years old	26

Source:
OFGEM 1999 review of Distribution Price Controls

Electricity Market

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of the electricity market had been opened up to competition as at July 1999 by each of the member states of the EU. [104886]

Mrs. Liddell: The latest information available from the Commission gives the position as follows:

Member state	*Percentage of market opening by May 1999*
Germany	100
Sweden	100
Finland	100
UK	100
Denmark	90
Netherlands	33
Spain	30
Italy	30
Portugal	26
Austria	27

Source:
Vol. I of the Second Report from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on the State of Liberalisation of the Energy Markets (May 1999)

France and Luxembourg have not yet implemented the Directive and the Commission has initiated infraction proceedings. Their draft laws, however, provide for market opening of 26 per cent. and 45 per cent. respectively. Belgium, Ireland and Greece have been allowed to delay the implementation of the Electricity Directive, Belgium and Ireland until February 2000, Greece until February 2001.

Correspondence

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what date he intends to reply to the letter from the right hon. Member for Wells concerning the business dealings of the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson) and his Department's inquiries into those dealings. [104673]

Mr. Byers: I replied to the right hon. Member's letter today.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry by what date he intends to reply in full to the letters from the right hon. Member for Wells dated 15 July 1998, 23 November 1998, 26 November 1998 and 11 December 1998 concerning the activities of Hollis Industries plc, TransTec plc and AGB International plc. [104675]

Mr. Byers: My predecessor replied to the right hon. Gentleman's letters as follows:

Letter	*Reply*
15 July 1998	23 September 1998
23 November 1998	11 December 1998
26 November 1998	11 December 1998
11 December 1998	21 December 1998

Hollis Industries plc

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will publish the report arising from his Department's investigations into Hollis Industries plc and the hon. Member for Coventry, North-West (Mr. Robinson). [104670]

Mr. Byers: These were confidential inquiries and in accordance with established practice and legal constraints I have no proposals to publish the findings of the investigation.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Parades Commission

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the religious and political affiliations of each member of the Parades Commission. [106109]

Mr. Ingram: Three members of the Parades Commission are from the Protestant community, three are from the Roman Catholic community and one is non-denominational. None has any active involvement with any political party.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many facilitators have been employed by the Parades Commission; how much has been paid *(a)* in total and *(b)* to each; and to what religious denominations they belong. [106108]

Mr. Ingram: A team of 12 Authorised Officers, representing a balance in gender and religion, has been employed by the Parades Commission, through Mediation Network NI, since April 1998.

The remuneration for 1998–99 was £7,000 per annum, based on a minimum of 80 days commitment per year. The remuneration for 1999–2000 was £7,200. The Commission has recently decided to extend the remit of the Authorised Officers to include education and community development and, accordingly, the days have been increased to a minimum of 100 days per annum with a commensurate increase in remuneration to £9,000 per annum. Since April 1998 to end December 1999 the total remuneration was £151,000.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what are the religious affiliations of the applicants for the post of Chairman of the Parades Commission; [106107]

(2) how many applications have been received for the post of Chairman of the Parades Commission. [106110]

Mr. Ingram: Of the 45 applicants who recently applied for the post of Chairman of the Parades Commission. 18 were Protestant, 11 were Roman Catholic and 16 were from other denominations or did not specify.

This information was obtained for the purposes of equal opportunities monitoring. It was not made available to the interviewing panel.

Mr. Richard Jameson

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment he has made as to whether *(a)* the murder of Mr. Richard Jameson was carried out by a terrorist organisation and *(b)* that murder indicates that the ceasefire has been broken. [106102]

Mr. Ingram: The Secretary of State keeps his judgment about the ceasefires under continual review, taking account of all the information he receives from his

security advisers. It is the Government's view that the main ceasefires on balance are holding. If there is evidence that an organisation is not maintaining its ceasefire he will not hesitate to act.

Decommissioning

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has been the cost to date of the International Independent Commission on Decommissioning. [106081]

Mr. Ingram: Updated costs are currently available only to 30 September 1999. The total expenditure shared by the British and Irish Governments from September 1997 to that date was IR£2,528,047. The British Government's share of that was STG£1,005,029.

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the dates of the meetings held between the International Independent Commission on Decommissioning and the representatives of each political party and terrorist organisation since the creation of the Commission. [106080]

Mr. Ingram: That is a matter for the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Solicitors (Age Discrimination)

Mr. White: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to prevent age discrimination in the training of solicitors. [105598]

Mr. Lock: The solicitor's profession is independent and self-regulating. It is for the Law Society, in the first place, to set and to apply any requirements in respect of the training of solicitors.

Meanwhile, the Government are committed to tackling age discrimination across the board. On 14 June 1999, the then Minister of State for Employment and Disability Rights launched the Code of Practice for Age Diversity in Employment, with supporting guidance for employers. It is aimed at all employers, including solicitors' firms. Although it is non-statutory, the Code sets the standard for non-ageist approaches to recruitment, training and development, promotion, redundancy and retirement.

Departmental Smoking Policy

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what action he is taking to reduce smoking in his Department. [105797]

Jane Kennedy: My Department has a well established "Smoking Policy" designed to provide smoke-free working conditions for those staff who want them, while offering limited, designated, smoking facilities for smokers and help for those who wish to stop smoking.

Recent Health Awareness events held in various areas of the Department were designed to encourage staff to consider the effect of their life styles on their health, including exercise, diet, smoking and drinking habits. Further such events are currently being considered.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

M60

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list, for each of contracts 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 for the M60 motorway between Denton and Middleton *(a)* the original price, *(b)* the cost of the completed contracts and *(c)* the estimated final cost of the remaining contracts; [104425]

(2) when he expects the M60 between Denton and Middleton to be completed; and if it will be opened in phases or in its entirety. [104426]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Peter Nutt, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Mr. Andrew Bennett, dated 20 January 2000:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions about the costs and programme for the M60 Manchester Outer Ring Road.

The scheme is split into four main contracts. The tender prices for each contract were: Contract 1, £101.9M; Contract 2, £48.9M; Contract 3, £50.1M and Contract 4, £18.2M.

Contracts 1 and 3 are still under construction so it will be some while before we know the final cost and although work on Contract 2 is complete, the final account has not been settled. In the circumstances, I am afraid I cannot let you have an estimate of the final outturn cost for these contracts. To do so would prejudice our position with the contractors in the event of disputes over claims or the settlement of accounts.

The final cost of Contract 4 was £30M.

The contract was let under the Institute of Civil Engineers 5th Edition form of contract which allows the contractor to be paid for the actual, rather than the estimated, work done and the risks that occur.

It is not always possible to identify in advance all the necessary work nor the precise nature of the ground and the contract allows for extensions of time for certain risks. In this case, the contract was extended by 37 weeks to allow for unforeseen ground conditions, including contaminated ground. Work was also severely delayed by exceptionally bad weather.

It is this additional work which caused costs to rise.

The disadvantage of this form of contract was the uncertainty of cost and time and the Agency addressed these issues in a review which led to an announcement in 1997 of new procurement initiatives. We are now using other forms of contract which share risk more equitably and encourage a partnering approach to get away from the adversarial way which has marked some of our contracts in the past.

We expect the remaining contracts to be completed and opened in their entirety by Summer this year. There are no plans for phased openings.

Cycle Routes

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the mileage in the Greater London area that has been constructed for use as cycle routes. [104792]

Mr. Hill: The total length of the London Cycle Network routes implemented at 1 April 1999 is some 755 miles.

Sustainable Development Commission

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) when the first meeting of the Sustainable Development Commission will take place; and how often the Commission will meet; [104786]

(2) how many permanent staff the Sustainable Development Commission will employ; [104787]

(3) if he will list the membership of the Sustainable Development Commission; [104788]

(4) what is the proposed budget of the Sustainable Development Commission; and how much of it will come from public funds. [104789]

Mr. Meacher: The Sustainable Development Commission, which will replace the existing UK Round Table and British Government Panel on Sustainable Development, is expected to begin work in the spring. It will be for the Commission to decide the frequency and timing of its meetings along with its other working arrangements. The DETR will provide funds for administrative support for the Commission which will have about 15 members, and a Secretariat that permits an increase on current staffing for the two existing advisory bodies, which currently have six permanent staff. A proposed budget of £492,000 has been allocated for the Commission for 2000–01. It will be open to the Commission to encourage others to contribute support, for example, by providing staff on secondment. The process of appointing members is under way in accordance with the guidance laid down by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

No-car Days

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce pilot no-car days in the UK. [104837]

Mr. Hill: No. Our view is that it is for local authorities to decide whether they want to introduce no-car days, taking into account local circumstances.

London Cabs (Blind Passengers)

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many complaints have been received by the Public Carriage Office regarding London taxi drivers who have refused to carry blind passengers with guide dogs in the last year; [105203]

(2) if he will estimate how many passengers with guide dogs are carried by London taxi drivers per year. [105204]

Mr. Hill: The Public Carriage Office has no recorded complaints of London licensed taxi drivers refusing to carry guide dogs in the last year.

Neither the Public Carriage Office nor the Department monitors the number or proportion of taxi journeys in London involving passengers with guide dogs.

Road Gritting

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidelines his Department has issued for the gritting of roads in icy conditions. [105056]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* The Highways Agency aims to provide a winter maintenance service of de-icing and snow clearing which, as far as possible, allows the safe movement of traffic on motorways and all purpose trunk roads in England, and keeps delays and accidents caused by adverse weather to a minimum. Their maintenance agents undertake the operational management of this service following the guidelines in the Highways Agency Trunk Road Maintenance Manual: Volume 2, Routine and Winter Maintenance Code.

For local authority roads, the Code of Good Practice for Highway Maintenance produced by the local government associations in England and Scotland in 1989 provides advice on systems to predict freezing conditions at Appendix 4.7. A partnership project between DETR, the Local Government Association, the Welsh Assembly, and DOE(NI) is currently considering the revision of this code.

London Elections

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to announce the outcome of his consultation on the proposed spending limits for London Mayoral and Greater London Assembly candidates and his decision on whether candidates will have free mailshots; and if he will make a statement. [105282]

Mr. Hill: We are considering the comments we received on our proposed limits to the spending of Mayoral and Assembly candidates in GLA elections. We will announce our conclusions in a written answer shortly. The limits will be set in an order subject to affirmative resolution.

Road Maintenance

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was his Department's budget for road maintenance in each of the last 10 years. [105704]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* Motorway and trunk road maintenance is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The Highways Agency (an executive agency of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) carries out this function on the Secretary of State's behalf.

The responsibility for maintenance of local roads rests with local highway authorities. Central Government funding for routine maintenance of local authority roads is provided through the highways maintenance element of the Revenue Support Grant (RSG). This is distributed by the Highways Maintenance Standard Spending Assessment (HMSSA).

Funding for structural maintenance of local authority principal roads and bridges has been provided through

Transport Supplementary Grant (TSG) until 1999–2000. In the future it will be provided by the Local Transport Plan capital settlement.

The provisions for the last 10 years were:

Year	*£ million*
Highway maintenance standard spending assessment	
1990–91	1,578
1991–92	1,786
1992–93	1,806
1993–94	1,736
1994–95	1,759
1995–96	1,759
1996–97	1,759
1997–98	1,759
1998–99	1,767
1999–2000	[1]1,813
Transport supplementary grant	
1992–93	47.64
1993–94	86.5
1994–95	75.5
1995–96	70.52
1996–97	43.9
1997–98	46
1998–99	40
1999–2000	56.75
Maintenance provision for motorways and trunk roads	
1990–91	[2]408
1991–92	[2]430
1992–93	[2]478
1993–94	726
1994–95	690
1995–96	675
1996–97	547
1997–98	531
1998–99	651
1999–2000	765

[1] Provisional figure
[2] Outturn figures
Note:
No separate TSG allocation was made for road maintenance before 1992–93

Deregulation

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what orders his Department has made under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 in each year since 1994; and what plans it has to introduce such orders. [106087]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The five orders my Department has made under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 are listed in table A. We continue to look for opportunities to use such orders to remove legislation where we can. Three areas where we expect to take action are listed in table B.

Table A: Orders already made

Year	*Title*
1996	The Deregulation (Parking Equipment) Order 1996
	The Deregulation (Motor Vehicles Tests) Order 1996
	The Deregulation (Building) (Initial Notices and Final Certificates) Order 1996
1998	The Deregulation (Exchangeable Driving Licences) Order 1998
	The Deregulation (Taxis and Private Hire Vehicles) Order 1998

Table B: Orders being considered

Topic	*Timing*
The disposal of houses by local authorities in England	Expected to be made in late April/early May
Amending Section 7 of the Building Act 1984	Expected to be laid before Parliament before the summer recess
Eligibility to drive a private hire vehicle outside London	Under consideration in the light of responses to consultation

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 1 December on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Hall. [105922]

Mr. Raynsford: This letter was sent to the Highways Agency for advice. They transferred the papers to the Government Office for the East of England for reply. Because of a clerical error this transfer was not completed. However the papers are now receiving urgent attention and my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister for Transport will reply shortly.

Tyneside Metro

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for public investment in the Tyneside Metro. [104829]

Mr. Hill: The Deputy Prime Minister announced the go-ahead for the extension of the Tyne and Wear Metro to Sunderland and South Hylton on 13 December last year. In addition to ERDF funding we expect to support at least £35 million of expenditure on the scheme.

Building Regulations (Fire Safety)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the revised guidance to support Part B (Fire Safety) of the Building Regulations; and if he will make a statement. [106529]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have today published the 2000 edition of the Approved Document to Part B of Schedule 1 to the Building Regulations 1991. The Building Regulations (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1999, which amended Part B, were laid before Parliament on 21 December 1999. The 2000 edition of the Approved Document offers ways of meeting these revised

requirements of the Building Regulations. The amendment Regulations and the 2000 edition of the Approved Document will both come into force on 1 July 2000.

There are a number of changes in this guidance, which was last published in 1992. Many of them have been to address areas where the guidance has become outdated, or where the guidance has needed clarification. In addition the guidance now contains information specifically relating to schools and gives guidance on sandwich panel construction.

Some new issues have also been introduced in the 2000 edition of the Approved Document. The revised Approved Document includes guidance on fire alarm and fire detection systems within all relevant buildings and not just dwellings, as was the case in the 1992 edition of the Approved Document. The revised Approved Document now suggests that within a dwelling all habitable rooms within storeys not more than 4.5 metres above ground level should be provided with an emergency egress window. Guidance has also been added to deal with means of escape from storeys within buildings other than dwellings which are also used for the consumption of food and/or drink by customers. This follows two fatal fires in department stores where it has been shown that people in a cafe are not so quick to respond to a fire alarm compared to the other general shoppers.

As announced on 14 December 1999 by my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning, the revised Approved Document now includes a provision for compartmentation or sprinkler protection in single storey retail buildings with a floor area exceeding 2000m^2.

In some areas where it has become evident in the light of experience that the guidance in the 1992 edition of the Approved Document was too onerous, the guidance has been relaxed. An example of this is the provision for firefighting shafts (a protected stair core incorporating a stair, lobby, dry riser and in the case of taller buildings a lift for use by the fire brigade). The guidance on these, which was introduced in the 1992 edition of the Approved Document, was found to be unreasonably onerous in certain low rise (between 7.5 metres and 18 metres higher) buildings which have a floor area of 600m^2 or more. The 2000 edition of the Approved Document relaxes the provision for certain buildings of this type and gives advice that recommends their use only in the shop and commercial, industrial and storage purpose groups.

DEFENCE

Gulf War

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the recommendations in the report of the external audit of the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme have been implemented. [106501]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence response to the recommendations in the report of the audit of the Gulf Veterans' Medical Assessment Programme (GVMAP) has now been completed. A very small number of issues remain outstanding but the response explains why this is so and what action is being taken.

The staff of the GVMAP have welcomed this opportunity to review their working practices and take action where necessary. The implementation of the audit recommendations will provide an improved service for Gulf veterans.

I am placing a copy of the response to the audit report in the Library of the House and it is also being published on the Ministry of Defence Gulf Veterans' Illnesses website.

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement regarding the implementation of the immunisation programme against biological warfare agents for United Kingdom forces during the Gulf conflict 1990–91. [106493]

Mr. Spellar: The Government's "New Beginning" policy statement set out the way forward for addressing the health concerns of Gulf veterans and included a commitment to establish a Fact Finding Team to look into the implementation of the anti-biological warfare immunisation programme during the Gulf conflict. Their work has now been completed and I am today publishing a paper entitled "Implementation of the immunisation programme against biological warfare agents for UK forces during the Gulf conflict 1990–91". Copies of the report have been placed in the Library of the House.

The publication of this paper reaffirms the Government's commitment to ensuring that Gulf veterans should have access to whatever information the Ministry of Defence possesses which might be relevant to their illnesses.

The deficiencies in the implementation of the 1990–91 anti-biological warfare immunisation programme have been, and continue to be, addressed in improvements to our current arrangements. When we again deployed to the Gulf in 1998 our immunisation programme was unclassified, all troops were fully briefed using standard material, the nature of the threat and the vaccine were described in detail and all records were updated, showing that the lessons of 1990–91 have been learned.

The report found that the voluntary nature of the immunisation programme operated as intended in the majority of units and locations. It confirms that no unusual or previously undisclosed immunisations were given during the Gulf conflict and also explains the codewords which were sometimes used for the vaccines.

Uptake of the anti-biological warfare immunisations in the early stages of the programme was high. Over 75 per cent. of all personnel deployed to the Gulf region are likely to have had anthrax and pertussis immunisations, and in many units this approached 100 per cent. Uptake of the second anthrax and pertussis immunisations and the first plague was less and varied between and within formations. Uptake of the third anthrax and the second plague immunisation was rare.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the suggested exposure of United Kingdom troops to chemical warfare agents in Al Jubayl on 19 January 1991. [106495]

Mr. Spellar: The 1997 "A New Beginning" policy statement set out a number of commitments to help address the health concerns of Gulf Veterans. One of these commitments was to review specific incidents of

suggested biological or chemical warfare exposures. As part of this commitment I am today publishing a paper entitled "A Review of the Suggested Exposure of UK Forces to Chemical Warfare Agents in Al Jubayl on 19 January 1991". A copy will be placed in the Library.

As a result of our review of the available information we assess that UK troops were not subject to attack or exposed to chemical warfare agents at Al Jubayl on 19 January 1991. Although it is not possible to give a single comprehensive explanation for all the events that took place on the morning of 19 January we conclude from the available information that the indications of the presence of Chemical Warfare agents were false alarms.

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the relationship between organophosphate pesticides and the illnesses suffered by some veterans of the 1990–91 Gulf conflict following recent reports from the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment and the Institute of Occupational Medicine. [106496]

Mr. Spellar: The COT report, published in November, concluded that neuropsychological abnormalities can occur as a long term complication following acute organophosphate (OP) poisoning, particularly if the poisoning is severe. Persistent peripheral neuropathy (disorders of the peripheral nerves) may occur, but not generally at a level which would give rise to symptoms. The body of evidence gives little support to the hypothesis that low-level exposure to OPs can cause chronic disease of the nervous system. However, the report notes that there remains a question over whether a small proportion of subjects may be at increased risk of clinically significant disease following low level exposure and recommends further research in this area.

The Institute of Occupational Medicine (IOM) report on the relationship between OP sheep dips and illness in exposed sheep farmers and dippers found the critical exposure factor to be contact with concentrate dip: much higher rates of symptoms, predominantly of a sensory nature, were reported among those who had been principal concentrate handlers. There is a very limited evidence that long term low-level exposure to organophosphates leads to long term neurotoxic effects.

The conclusions from these reports are in line with the findings of the Defence Scientific Advisory Council's (DSAC) Working Party report, the publication of which I announced on 20 October 1999 and which reviewed existing literature on the long term neurotoxicity of anticholinesterases. It concluded that high doses of organophosphates may have long term effects on the peripheral nervous system, but that there is limited evidence about long term toxic effects following low doses.

During the Gulf conflict very few UK service personnel would have handled concentrated OPs. Those that did would have been Environmental Health Officers or technicians, or individual regimental hygiene duties personnel who were appropriately trained in procedures and the use of equipment. There was no evidence of acute organophosphate poisoning or of subsequent unusual ill health arising in this small group.

Neither the IOM nor the COT report provides evidence which would cause us to reassess our view of the possible role of OPs in relation to Gulf Veterans' illnesses. The case for ill-health effects resulting from long term low level exposure to OPs remains unproven and there is currently no reason to believe that Gulf veterans who might have been in casual contact with dilute pesticide (e.g. from the treatment of tents and equipment) or with the malathion dust used to de-louse Iraqi prisoners of war, are at increased risk of long term ill-health.

Although it remains the case that there is limited evidence of a link between low level exposure to OPs and adverse health effects, MOD will continue to monitor the debate about the safety of OPs. We will continue to review scientific evidence in the light of potential exposures which may have occurred in the Gulf and follow future research, including that recommended by the COT report, very closely.

Duke of York Royal Military School

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Duke of York Royal Military School for the financial year 1999–2000. [106545]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Chief Executive of The Duke of York's Royal Military School has been set the following key targets for 1999–2000:

To achieve 100 per cent. of GCSE passes at grades A* to G.

To achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C; 1999–2000 target is 86 per cent.

To achieve 88 per cent. of A level passes at grades A to E.

To achieve three or more A level passes at grades A to E; 1999–2000 target is 80 per cent.

To achieve 34 per cent. of A level passes at Grades A and B.

To achieve 100 per cent. award rate for GNVQ Advances and BTEC National Diploma courses.

To achieve places in higher education for at least 80 per cent. of sixth form leavers.

To achieve a pupil per capita cost of no more than £12,922.

To generate income of at least £475,000.

To achieve at least 270 applications for September 2000 intake.

Helsinki Council

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the Annex to the Presidency Conclusions of the European Council held in Helsinki relating to three new military committees under that Council, *(a)* what is the specific purpose of each and how it relates to the others, *(b)* what instructions have been sent by the Council to the Secretary General or High Representative of each in respect of his function and duties and *(c)* what the lines of accountability are. [105131]

Mr. Vaz: I have been asked to reply.

The Helsinki European Council set the framework for the political and military structures that will be necessary for the EU to decide and act on security and defence matters. These bodies are a standing Political and Security Committee (which will handle the full range of Common Foreign and Security Policy issues), the Military Committee and the Military Staff. The incoming Portuguese Presidency was tasked, together with the EU Secretary General/High Representative, to

carry this work forward. The terms of reference, guidance and accountability for each body will thus be developed in due course.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Concessionary Television Licences

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many retirement pensioners in Heywood and Middleton aged 75 or over *(a)* will benefit and *(b)* will not benefit from free TV licences. [105198]

Janet Anderson: Figures are not available for the number of people aged 75 or over in Heywood and Middleton. However, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his pre-Budget statement on 9 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 883–91, everyone aged 75 or over will receive their television licence free of charge from this autumn. We shall announce full details of the scheme shortly.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to ensure that all pensioners receive free TV licences. [105414]

Kate Hoey: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced on 9 November 1999, *Official Report*, columns 883–91, from this autumn, everyone aged 75 or over will receive their television licence free of charge. The Government are introducing this concession for older pensioners because, as a group, they are more likely to rely on television as their window on the world and to be on low incomes. We have no plans to extend the concession to all pensioners, but we are considering the Davies report's recommendations on the existing concessionary television licence scheme in the light of responses to the public consultation and will announce our conclusions shortly.

PRIME MINISTER

Media Policy

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if those dealing with the media in *(a)* his Office and *(b)* other ministerial offices, (i) ever, (ii) routinely and (iii) always record conversations with journalists; and for what period (1) unofficial and (2) official recordings are preserved. [106036]

The Prime Minister: It is now standard practice to tape press briefings given by the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman and other Downing street Spokesmen and a written record is circulated around Whitehall Departments, an innovation introduced by this Government. A record is kept on file.

European Defence

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the answer from the Secretary of State for Defence to the hon. Member for Croydon, South of 10 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 97W, if he will place in the Library the speech given by his Policy Unit adviser on Europe and Defence, Mr. Liddle, to the French-German-UK Seminar at the Institut de Haute Education de la Défense Nationale, Paris in November 1999. [104803]

The Prime Minister: I am advised that Mr. Liddle's talk was not transcribed. I am therefore unable to consider the hon. Member's request.

Ilisu Dam

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions took place between EU Commission officials and the Prime Minister of Turkey on the Ilisu Dam Project during the 48 hours prior to his attendance at the Helsinki Summit. [105592]

The Prime Minister: I have no responsibility for any discussions which the European Commission officials may enter into. However, I am advised that officials of the Export Credits Guarantee Department and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are not aware of any discussions on the Ilisu Dam project taking place between European Commission officials and the Prime Minister of Turkey during the 48 hours prior to his attendance at the Helsinki Summit.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education

14. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the Government's plans are in respect of salaries and conditions in higher education. [103688]

28. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on university staff salaries. [103706]

Mr. Wicks: The pay and conditions of staff in higher education are a matter for the employers not the Government. The Bett Report into higher education pay and conditions, published in June 1999, made a number of recommendations for restructuring the sector's terms and conditions. It will be for the higher education employers to consider how these recommendations can be implemented.

Exclusions

15. **Mr. Coaker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures the Government have taken to support schools in reducing the number of exclusions. [103690]

Jacqui Smith: Last July we issued new guidance on 'Social Inclusion: Pupil Support' which includes practical preventive strategies, based on good practice, to help schools deal with behaviour problems. This is backed up with nearly £500 million over three years for projects to prevent exclusions.

Learning and Skills Council

16. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what role will be played by business on the Learning and Skills Council. [103691]

Mr. Wicks: As the LSC Prospectus published before Christmas says, business will have a key role in the new Learning and Skills Council. We intend that at least 40 per cent. of the new Council's members will come from the private sector, and we will be looking to people with business experience to chair the national and most local Councils. In addition, the LSC's local arms will work closely with the new Small Business Service on workforce development.

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for the Learning and Skills Council. [103713]

Mr. Wicks: On December 14 my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment published a detailed Prospectus for the LSC. Subject to the passage of the Learning and Skills Bill, we expect the Learning and Skills Council to be in full operation from April 2001.

Secondary Schools

17. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to improve the quality of education for secondary school pupils. [103692]

Ms Estelle Morris: An agenda for raising educational standards for secondary school pupils was laid out by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment at the North of England conference on 6 January.

Small Businesses

18. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what structures exist to facilitate communication between his Department and small businesses. [103693]

Ms Jowell: My Department communicates with small business primarily through small business representative bodies, and through intermediary organisations like Training and Enterprise Councils, Business Links, National Training Organisations and enterprise agencies.

Rural Areas

19. **Dr. George Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to address pockets of low expectations and low skills in rural constituencies. [103694]

Mr. Wicks: We are committed to addressing low expectations and low skills wherever they are found. That is why we are setting targets at school and LEA level and creating a new system of post-16 learning that is responsive to local needs.

Labour Market

20. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps his Department is taking to broaden participation in the labour market. [103695]

Ms Jowell: The Government's Welfare to Work programme is the biggest ever initiative to help more people participate in the labour market and get back into work.

Age Discrimination

21. **Mr. Connarty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps are being taken to promote the code of practice on age discrimination in the workplace. [103696]

Ms Hodge: The Code has been well received, with over 40,000 copies being issued since its launch in June. Copies of the Code of Practice were sent to Chambers of Commerce; Training and Enterprise Councils; Local Authorities; National Training Organisations; Trade Associations and 5000 businesses. Advertisements about the Code have appeared in Citizens Advice Bureaux; Jobcentres; local libraries and in a calendar sent to 120,000 small firms. Advertisements have also appeared in a range of publications aimed at management and personnel professionals.

I will be making an announcement next month on further plans for promoting its key messages.

Disabled People

22. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to propose legislation to guarantee legal rights of access for the disabled to education and training. [103697]

Ms Hodge: We announced our intention on 13 December to bring forward legislation to give people with disabilities equal access to schools and further, higher and adult education. The provision of training is generally already covered by Part II of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) where it concerns employees, or Part III of the DDA where it constitutes a service to the public, depending on the particular circumstances of the disabled person and the provider.

Job Mobility

23. **Mr. Best:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment his Department has made of the role of mobility within city boundaries in matching jobseekers to vacancies. [103699]

Ms Jowell: My Department recognises that increasing the mobility of jobseekers is critically important in helping people to find jobs, and employers to find people. The Employment Service has developed a comprehensive strategy to address mobility issues.

Attendance Rates

24. **Mr. Shaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what support and advice has been given to schools to improve the rate of attendance by pupils. [103700]

Jacqui Smith: We are investing £500 million over three years on projects tackling truancy and school exclusion and other initiatives to get children back into school and learning. To support this major investment, we issued new guidance to schools in July 1999 entitled "Social Inclusion: Pupil Support", which includes evidence on what works in increasing attendance rates at school.

On 1 November 1999 we also issued our strategy document "Tackling Truancy Together" which sets out our further proposals for helping to reduce unauthorised absence from school. We are currently considering the

many responses we received to the proposals in that document, and will make an announcement soon on what further action we want to take to help reduce unauthorised absence from school.

Further Education

25. **Mr. Ivan Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for funding the further education sector. [103701]

Mr. Wicks: In November 1999 I announced an additional £365 million for further education in 2001–02, bringing funding to nearly £3.9 billion, a 7.7 per cent. rise in real terms over 2000–01. A consultation document which we published on 11 January sets out how the Learning and Skills Council will fund post-16 education and training from April 2001. Further Education will continue to play its key role in improving the skills base of the country.

32. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to raise standards in the further education sector. [103710]

Mr. Wicks: Higher standards in further education colleges are being promoted through the Further Education Standards Fund which comprises £275 million over the three years from 1999–2002. The Government will also continue to promote high standards in Further Education through new legislation in the Learning and Skills Bill, which includes provision for improved post-16 inspection arrangements.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many 16 to 19-year-olds are receiving full-time education in *(a)* school sixth forms, *(b)* sixth form colleges and *(c)* general further education colleges. [106014]

Mr. Wicks: The latest provisional figures for 16 to 18-year-olds in full-time education in England are for end of calendar year 1998. They are shown in the table:

	Thousand
Schools[1]	394
Sixth form college	112
Other FE college	380
Total	886

[1] Includes independent and special schools

Source:

Statistical First Release 13/99: Participation in education and training by 16 to 18-year-olds in England, 1988 to 1998

Families

26. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to encourage changes in employment practices to facilitate the combination of employment with family responsibilities. [103703]

34. **Caroline Flint:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress is being made in developing a campaign to encourage changes in employment practices to bring about a better balance in people's lives between work and home. [103712]

Ms Hodge: Our campaign will be delivered in partnership with leading employers and others. It will promote good practice that both benefits the business and enables employees to balance work and home better. Details are currently being finalised.

Higher Education (External Examiners)

27. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to assess the independence of external examiners in the higher education degree process. [103705]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend has no such plans. External examiners are contracted by, and answerable to, the autonomous higher education institutions who appoint them. The institutional reviews undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education look at a range of issues relating to external examiners.

Employment Service

29. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to make it easier for firms to notify vacancies to the Employment Service and to obtain information on vacancies posted. [103707]

Ms Jowell: From Autumn 2000 the Employment Service will be introducing a new set of IT-based gateways to give its customers convenient, user friendly access to its services. Employers will benefit from having their vacancies displayed to a much wider range of jobseekers through touchscreen kiosks in Jobcentres and elsewhere, and on an Internet Jobsbank. Notifying Jobcentres will be made easier for employers by providing them with a single national telephone number and internet-based links.

New Deal (Young People)

30. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on progress made under the new deal for young people in meeting the target of moving 250,000 young people into jobs. [103708]

Ms Jowell: With over 169,000 young people having found jobs to the end of October 1999, the trend indicates that we will meet the manifesto commitment to move 250,000 young people into work under the New Deal for Young People. The success of the New Deal so far will be built on by extending further help with basic skills and personal presentation to young people who will benefit, particularly the most disadvantaged. The 60 per cent. cut in long-term youth unemployment since May 1997 is good news for our young people and for the prosperity of the country.

Standard Spending Assessments

31. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to

reform the standard spending assessment distribution per pupil to reduce disparities between local education authorities. [103709]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government announced in November 1998 a three year review in partnership with local government to look for a way of distributing revenue support grant which is simpler, more stable, more robust and fairer than the present arrangements for SSAs.

Drug Use

33. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the impact of anti-smoking and anti-illegal drugs education programmes on reducing drug use. [103711]

Jacqui Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave on 21 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 555W, in which I announced plans for a long-term study on the effectiveness of drug education.

Curriculum 2000

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the funds allocated to schools for the implementation of Curriculum 2000 will be allocated to sixth forms with fewer than *(a)* 50, *(b)* 100, *(c)* 150 and *(d)* 200 pupils; and what will be the method of allocation. [104849]

Mr. Wicks: The Education Standard Spending Assessment for 2000–01 takes into account the estimated additional recurrent costs of successfully implementing the forthcoming reforms to post-16 qualifications in LEA maintained schools. It is for individual local education authorities to decide how to allocate resources to the schools they maintain.

New Deal (Over-50s)

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress to date of the New Deal for those aged over 50 years. [103702]

Ms Jowell: New Deal 50plus has made an excellent start in nine selected areas of the country. People aged over 50 who have received one of a number of benefits for six months or more are eligible for a package of advice and other support including a cash employment credit to help them back into work. By early January over 350 people had found work with the support of New Deal 50plus. Many of those finding work so far through this New Deal have been out of work and on benefits for a long time. We will launch New Deal 50plus across the whole country in April.

Ofsted Inspections

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy that Ofsted inspectors will, as a matter of course, meet the trade union representatives during an inspection. [103704]

Ms Estelle Morris: This is a matter for Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead. I have asked him to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

CABINET OFFICE

On-line Services

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps she has taken to benchmark the extent of on-line Government services in the United Kingdom against other countries, with particular reference to the US and Australia. [105187]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government are very keen to learn from good examples of international electronic service delivery. There are a number of very interesting examples of developments in this area not just in the USA and Australia, but in other countries. We intend to publish a report in the summer that will set out the results of our research and indicate what lessons we can learn from exemplars of international best practice.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what steps Her Majesty's Government have taken to introduce the use of the Internet for *(a)* VAT payment, *(b)* passport renewal, *(c)* renewal of television licenses, *(d)* renewal of vehicle licences and *(e)* Government procurement contracts; and what targets exist for Internet based transactions in these areas. [105249]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As part of our Modernising Government programme we announced in our Action Plan, published in July 1999, that we would provide six-monthly reports on our progress in delivering Government services electronically. The second of these reports was recently published on the Central Information Technology Unit (CITU) website (http://www.citu.gov.uk). Copies of these reports are available in the Libraries of the House.

I refer the hon. Gentleman to my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones), on 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 276W.

Health Appointments

Mr. Brady: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what representations she has made to the Commissioner for Public Appointments regarding the date of publication of her report on appointments to NHS trusts and health authorities. [106018]

Mr. Stringer: None.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she expects the Commissioner for Public Appointments to publish her report on public appointments to NHS trusts and health authorities. [106019]

Mr. Stringer: The publication of the report is entirely a matter for the Commissioner. However, I understand that a press release issued by the Commissioner's office on 17 January 2000 stated that the Commissioner will announce her findings and recommendations in early March.

Drug Misuse (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what were the numbers of registered drug misusers in Gloucestershire *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1999. [105552]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Addicts Index was discontinued by the Home Office in 1997. The following table shows the number of drug misusers presenting to

treatment agencies in the Gloucestershire Health Authority area. Figures for the six month period ending September 1999 are not yet available.

Six month period ending	*Agency episodes reported in Gloucestershire Health Authority area*[1]
March 1997	28
September 1997	33
March 1998	63
September 1998	71
March 1999	96

[1] The number of agency episodes is generally higher than the number of users as a person may start an episode during the period at more than one agency

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what measures she is taking to counter the increase in numbers of people registered as drug misusers in Gloucestershire. [105551]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government's strategy for tackling drug misuse was set out in the White Paper "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain" in 1998. The Government backed this ten-year strategy by allocating an extra £217 million for anti-drugs work as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review. This includes an additional £70.5 million for health and local authorities over the next three years for drug treatment services and £18 million to support drug prevention activities, particularly among young people. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has also announced a further £20 million for the expansion of Arrest Referral Schemes to help drug-misusing offenders obtain treatment. The Gloucestershire Drug Action Team is responsible for co-ordinating local implementation of the strategy.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Smoking Policy

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Solicitor-General what action he is taking to reduce smoking in his Department. [105793]

The Solicitor-General: The Law Officers' Departments have different policies on smoking in offices, reflecting the different buildings and the results of locally based decisions. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has a general no smoking policy. Staff may not smoke in their own rooms. The provision of a separate smoking room is a matter for managers to decide locally, taking into account the interest of staff. CPS HQ is in two buildings. In the London office, the number of smoking rooms has been reduced to one and in the York office, there is no separate smoking room. Information about the provision of separate smoking rooms in the CPS's 42 Areas is not available centrally.

The Counselling and Support Service of the CPS advertises the now annual National No Smoking Day (in their in-house publication "Inform") and offer literature to assist anyone wishing to give up smoking.

The Treasury Solicitor's Department has a policy of restricting and confining smoking to clearly defined areas. The Department's Health and Safety Advisory Committee is currently reviewing the policy and will in due course be making recommendations.

The Serious Fraud Office accommodation is non-smoking although a small smoking room is provided. Free health screening checks have recently been made available to all staff and these will make staff more aware of the dangers of smoking.

In the Law Officers' Legal Secretariat smoking is not permitted in any of the meeting rooms or the shared offices. Smoking is restricted to a smoking room. Staff are encouraged and supported in giving up smoking.

William Beausire

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Solicitor-General what reports he has received concerning the disappearance of William Beausire in Santiago in 1974; and what requests he has received for a private prosecution. [106029]

The Solicitor-General: Solicitors acting for a number of individuals applied for Law Officer consent to prosecute Senator Pinochet for offences of torture and hostage taking. The papers included reference to William Beausire. On 11 February 1999, the then Attorney-General considered the application and took advice from Treasury Counsel. The solicitors were advised that consent to prosecute was declined. The basis of that decision is that the relevant legislation is not retrospective and the material supplied by the solicitors in support of the application provided insufficient admissible evidence to justify a prosecution.

SCOTLAND

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the number of asylum seekers and refugees seeking places in Scotland. [104808]

Dr. Reid: At present, local authorities in Scotland give support to between about 150 and 200 new asylum seekers each year.

In addition, in 1999, 349 refugees from Kosovo came to Scotland under the Kosovo Humanitarian Evacuation Programme.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Switchboard

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee when the delays in connecting hon. Members to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other Government Departments via the House switchboard will be remedied; what the cause is of the delays; and when the House authorities became aware of the problem. [106053]

Mr. Allan: This is an operational matter falling within the remit of the Head of Telecommunications. I have therefore asked him to reply directly to the hon. Member.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 25 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 179W, for what reason he has failed to fulfil the undertaking to reply shortly to the letters dated 4 August, 10 September and 14 October, from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. Cleveland Savory. [104466]

Mr. Straw: I am sorry for the delay in replying to my right hon. Friend. I am looking into the matter and will write to him this week.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters dated 21 September, 27 October and 2 December 1999 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. Ahmed Said Mohammed Aderi. [104455]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend on 17 January 2000. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters to him dated 21 September, 27 October and 2 December 1999 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. Muhidin Abdul Rahman. [104454]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton on 19 January 2000. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters dated 21 September, 27 October and 2 December 1999 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, with regard to Mr. N. Askander. [104456]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to my right hon. Friend on 17 January 2000. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 30 November on behalf of his constituent, Mrs. Djukic. [105921]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary wrote to the right hon. Member on 18 January 2000.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 25 November on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Reeves. [105924]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary replied to the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire's letter of 25 November 1999 on 14 January 2000.

Fathers

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment the Government have made of the impact of fathers' involvement in childrearing on the behaviour and attainment of their sons and daughters; and if he will make a statement. [104876]

Mr. Boateng: There is strong evidence that fathers play a critical role in bringing up children. Boys who have no contact with their fathers are more likely to underachieve at school. Supporting fathers is an important part of the Government's family policy. We have also provided fathers with the right to parental leave, and those in receipt of Working Families Tax Credit and some other benefits will receive income support while taking the leave to make it a viable prospect for all parents. Under the Family Support Grants programme, a number of voluntary organisations have been funded to develop work specifically with fathers.

Police

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each police authority in England the percentage of net expenditure in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99 which was funded by (i) council tax, (ii) police grant and (iii) other grants. [105258]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested on council tax and police grant, which has been compiled from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy's Police Statistics, is set out in the table. Information on the percentage of net expenditure funded by other grants is not readily available.

Percentage of English police force net expenditure met by council tax, Home Office police specific grant and other sources, 1996–97 to 1998–99

	Council tax	*Home Office police specific grant*	*Other sources*
1996–97			
Avon and Somerset	14.8	50.8	34.4
Bedfordshire	14.9	50.9	34.2
Cambridgeshire	15.7	51.3	33.0
Cheshire	16.0	52.6	31.4
City of London	n/a	48.6	n/a
Cleveland	9.9	50.3	39.7
Cumbria	14.4	50.5	35.2
Derbyshire	14.7	51.3	34.0
Devon and Cornwall	16.1	51.2	32.7
Dorset	22.1	47.9	30.0
Durham	11.4	52.7	35.9
Essex	17.4	50.3	32.3
Gloucestershire	15.2	50.2	34.6
Greater Manchester	10.0	50.4	39.6
Hampshire	16.3	51.0	32.8
Hertfordshire	17.8	51.0	31.2
Humberside	11.7	51.9	36.4
Kent	15.8	51.1	33.1
Lancashire	12.1	50.6	37.2
Leicestershire	13.6	51.0	35.3
Lincolnshire	21.1	48.5	30.3
Merseyside	10.6	50.9	38.5
Metropolitan Police	8.3	50.3	41.4
Norfolk	15.4	50.6	34.0
Northamptonshire	20.7	49.5	29.8
Northumbria	10.0	50.5	39.5

Percentage of English police force net expenditure met by council tax, Home Office police specific grant and other sources, 1996–97 to 1998–99

	Council tax	Home Office police specific grant	Other sources
North Yorkshire	17.7	52.1	30.1
Nottinghamshire	12.1	50.9	37.0
South Yorkshire	10.8	51.7	37.5
Staffordshire	14.5	50.6	34.8
Suffolk	16.2	50.9	32.9
Surrey	17.0	49.3	33.7
Sussex	17.2	50.3	32.5
Thames Valley	17.9	50.5	31.6
Warwickshire	17.0	51.8	31.1
West Mercia	17.0	50.6	32.4
West Midlands	10.1	51.0	38.9
West Yorkshire	10.4	49.2	40.5
Wiltshire	17.4	50.7	31.9
Total	12.3	50.6	37.1

	Council tax	Home Office police specific grant	Other sources
1997–98			
Avon and Somerset	16.9	52.1	31.0
Bedfordshire	16.5	51.4	32.1
Cambridgeshire	17.2	50.3	32.6
Cheshire	16.7	49.1	34.2
City of London	n/a	47.5	n/a
Cleveland	11.4	49.7	38.9
Cumbria	15.2	48.7	36.1
Derbyshire	16.0	50.3	33.7
Devon and Cornwall	17.1	50.9	32.0
Dorset	23.9	48.5	27.6
Durham	12.1	48.6	39.3
Essex	18.9	50.6	30.5
Gloucestershire	17.4	51.8	30.8
Greater Manchester	11.4	49.8	38.7
Hampshire	17.8	50.1	32.1
Hertfordshire	19.3	51.0	29.6
Humberside	12.8	49.9	37.2
Kent	16.6	48.6	34.8
Lancashire	13.6	49.5	36.9
Leicestershire	14.8	49.9	35.2
Lincolnshire	20.5	46.5	33.0
Merseyside	12.2	50.7	37.1
Metropolitan Police	9.4	53.7	36.9
Norfolk	16.7	48.7	34.7
Northamptonshire	21.2	46.8	32.1
Northumbria	11.1	49.0	39.9
North Yorkshire	18.4	49.8	31.8
Nottinghamshire	12.4	49.0	38.6
South Yorkshire	11.6	47.8	40.6
Staffordshire	16.3	51.9	31.8
Suffolk	17.8	50.0	32.2
Surrey	16.6	49.3	34.1
Sussex	18.7	49.7	31.6
Thames Valley	19.5	49.7	30.8
Warwickshire	18.2	50.4	31.4
West Mercia	18.5	49.5	32.0
West Midlands	11.1	48.7	40.3
West Yorkshire	11.5	47.0	41.4
Wiltshire	20.1	53.0	26.8
Total	13.5	50.6	35.8

	Council tax	Home Office police specific grant	Other sources
1998–99			
Avon and Somerset	17.0	51.6	31.4
Bedfordshire	16.9	50.6	32.6
Cambridgeshire	15.4	50.4	34.3
Cheshire	17.3	50.3	32.4
City of London	n/a	42.9	n/a
Cleveland	9.5	51.3	39.2
Cumbria	18.8	47.0	34.3
Derbyshire	17.2	50.0	32.8
Devon and Cornwall	15.8	51.7	32.4
Dorset	25.8	47.6	26.6
Durham	11.3	53.6	35.1
Essex	22.1	50.1	27.8
Gloucestershire	18.5	48.6	33.0
Greater Manchester	12.0	52.8	35.2
Hampshire	16.9	52.1	31.0
Hertfordshire	21.4	49.2	29.4
Humberside	12.2	50.3	37.5
Kent	15.6	52.3	32.1
Lancashire	13.2	50.6	36.2
Leicestershire	16.9	49.3	33.7
Lincolnshire	23.5	45.7	30.8
Merseyside	12.2	49.6	38.2
Metropolitan Police	11.9	54.3	33.8
Norfolk	17.7	51.5	30.8
Northamptonshire	20.7	48.1	31.2
Northumbria	9.8	51.0	39.2
North Yorkshire	17.3	51.4	31.3
Nottinghamshire	13.1	49.4	37.4
South Yorkshire	11.8	50.6	37.6
Staffordshire	20.5	49.0	30.5
Suffolk	17.8	51.4	30.8
Surrey	24.7	44.5	30.8
Sussex	18.2	51.5	30.3
Thames Valley	19.0	53.6	27.4
Warwickshire	21.3	50.4	28.3
West Mercia	18.8	47.8	33.4
West Midlands	10.1	51.6	38.3
West Yorkshire	11.7	51.4	36.9
Wiltshire	20.0	47.2	32.8
Total	13.7	49.0	37.3

Source:
1996/97–1998/99: CIPFA Police Statistics Actuals

Police force net expenditure, and percentage met by council tax, Home Office police specific grant and other sources, 1996–97 to 1998–99

£000

	1996–97				1997–98			
	Council tax	Home Office police specific grant	Other	Net expenditure	Council tax	Home Office police specific grant	Other	Net expenditure
Avon and Somerset	22,443	77,279	52,365	152,087	25,839	79,564	47,270	152,673
Bedfordshire	8,433	28,811	19,383	56,627	9,643	30,102	18,825	58,570
Cambridgeshire	10,236	33,356	21,432	65,024	11,800	n/a	n/a	68,681
Cheshire	15,072	49,500	29,605	94,177	17,322	51,103	35,580	104,005
City of London	n/a	27,832	n/a	57,317	n/a	27,476	n/a	57,893
Cleveland	7,250	36,801	29,057	73,108	8,587	37,523	29,316	75,426
Cumbria	8,168	28,689	19,999	56,856	9,365	30,038	22,306	61,709

Police force net expenditure, and percentage met by council tax, Home Office police specific grant and other sources, 1996–97 to 1998–99

£000

	1996–97				1997–98			
	Council tax	*Home Office police specific grant*	*Other*	*Net expenditure*	*Council tax*	*Home Office police specific grant*	*Other*	*Net expenditure*
Derbyshire	13,333	46,356	30,731	90,420	15,276	48,090	32,275	95,641
Devon and Cornwall	24,192	77,025	49,175	150,392	26,602	79,047	49,786	155,435
Dorset	14,983	32,474	20,374	67,831	16,684	33,804	19,239	69,727
Durham	7,778	35,828	24,429	68,035	9,087	36,513	29,566	75,166
Dyfed-Powys	7,901	24,241	15,727	47,869	8,244	25,198	17,510	50,952
Essex	26,275	76,161	48,976	151,412	29,817	79,694	47,976	157,487
Gloucestershire	8,874	29,316	20,230	58,420	10,223	30,371	18,039	58,633
Greater Manchester	34,075	171,881	135,214	341,170	40,354	176,078	136,887	353,319
Gwent	8,193	31,334	18,215	57,742	8,667	32,423	23,508	64,598
Hampshire	28,134	88,069	56,642	172,845	32,134	90,616	58,041	180,791
Hertfordshire	15,792	45,305	27,766	88,863	17,971	47,465	27,575	93,011
Humberside	11,653	51,746	36,320	99,719	13,622	53,034	39,564	106,220
Kent	25,477	82,584	53,564	161,625	28,909	84,673	60,629	174,211
Lancashire	19,638	81,984	60,243	161,865	22,982	83,768	62,525	169,275
Leicestershire	12,649	47,390	32,814	92,853	14,652	49,336	34,801	98,789
Lincolnshire	12,999	29,848	18,661	61,508	13,544	30,788	21,852	66,184
Merseyside	23,345	112,589	85,238	221,172	27,390	113,660	83,277	224,327
Metropolitan Police	139,075	846,762	697,344	1,683,181	157,930	900,345	618,342	1,676,617
Norfolk	11,666	38,204	25,677	75,547	13,363	39,053	27,806	80,222
Northamptonshire	12,257	29,321	17,674	59,252	13,672	30,218	20,715	64,605
Northumbria	18,644	94,046	73,720	186,410	21,630	95,656	77,806	195,092
North Wales	10,695	34,681	22,890	68,266	11,240	35,696	23,984	70,920
North Yorkshire	11,885	34,961	20,196	67,042	13,200	35,796	22,844	71,840
Nottinghamshire	13,775	57,777	42,039	113,591	14,953	59,070	46,533	120,556
South Wales	18,362	75,247	53,849	147,458	19,491	77,732	62,188	159,411
South Yorkshire	16,366	78,009	56,574	150,949	19,214	79,346	67,467	166,027
Staffordshire	15,658	54,611	37,563	107,832	18,003	57,200	35,061	110,264
Suffolk	9,892	31,033	20,038	60,963	11,327	31,858	20,491	63,676
Surrey	14,528	42,090	28,727	85,345	15,126	44,808	31,042	90,976
Sussex	25,870	75,764	48,992	150,626	29,400	78,415	49,816	157,631
Thames Valley	36,051	101,658	63,688	201,397	41,006	104,631	64,696	210,333
Warwickshire	8,111	24,725	14,850	47,686	9,270	25,725	16,008	51,003
West Mercia	17,397	51,632	33,049	102,078	19,958	53,342	34,488	107,788
West Midlands	34,210	172,343	131,439	337,992	39,829	175,339	144,961	360,129
West Yorkshire	27,479	130,447	107,307	265,233	32,458	132,526	116,761	281,745
Wiltshire	10,442	30,428	19,123	59,993	11,778	31,043	15,714	58,535
Total	819,256	3,350,138	2,420,899	6,619,778	931,562	3,438,163	2,413,070	6,870,093

£000

	1998–99				1999–2000
	Council tax	*Home Office police specific grant*	*Other*	*Net expenditure*	*Net expenditure*
Avon and Somerset	27,680	83,927	51,119	162,726	174,424
Bedfordshire	10,416	31,236	20,126	61,778	64,027
Cambridgeshire	11,286	36,974	25,172	73,432	75,363
Cheshire	18,573	53,821	34,699	107,093	111,094
City of London	n/a	25,909	n/a	60,350	58,719
Cleveland	7,734	41,731	31,830	81,295	85,397
Cumbria	11,730	29,360	21,442	62,532	64,693
Derbyshire	17,238	50,026	32,800	100,064	107,035
Devon and Cornwall	26,352	86,035	53,943	166,330	173,649
Dorset	18,838	34,838	19,441	73,117	77,749
Durham	8,427	40,023	26,223	74,673	80,712
Dyfed-Powys	10,212	26,041	13,787	50,040	56,143
Essex	34,676	78,591	43,555	156,822	171,590
Gloucestershire	11,604	30,537	20,721	62,862	65,933
Greater Manchester	42,558	186,858	124,755	354,171	387,256
Gwent	9,683	34,265	23,707	67,655	71,414
Hampshire	31,481	97,239	57,941	186,661	196,955
Hertfordshire	20,331	46,771	27,966	95,068	102,361
Humberside	13,762	56,629	42,180	112,571	114,306
Kent	27,473	91,742	56,362	175,577	186,225
Lancashire	23,370	89,725	64,215	177,310	182,679
Leicestershire	17,419	50,708	34,663	102,790	106,279
Lincolnshire	15,645	30,484	20,535	66,664	69,970

£000

	1998–99				1999–2000
	Council tax	Home Office police specific grant	Other	Net expenditure	Net expenditure
Merseyside	29,259	119,156	91,852	240,267	249,522
Metropolitan Police	204,132	931,431	580,862	1,716,425	1,840,245
Norfolk	14,236	41,512	24,795	80,543	86,870
Northamptonshire	13,859	32,266	20,932	67,057	70,432
Northumbria	20,187	104,638	80,445	205,270	213,010
North Wales	13,612	37,434	21,435	72,481	80,505
North Yorkshire	13,020	38,764	23,560	75,344	78,085
Nottinghamshire	16,680	62,799	47,539	127,018	130,173
South Wales	22,394	82,243	56,301	160,938	169,968
South Yorkshire	19,726	84,510	62,923	167,159	173,933
Staffordshire	23,861	56,924	35,446	116,231	127,472
Suffolk	11,786	33,943	20,367	66,096	70,538
Surrey	22,612	40,650	28,163	91,425	100,375
Sussex	29,406	83,399	49,042	161,847	165,804
Thames Valley	39,878	112,357	57,440	209,675	232,729
Warwickshire	11,080	26,196	14,739	52,015	56,157
West Mercia	21,382	54,354	38,019	113,755	116,490
West Midlands	37,194	190,208	141,206	368,608	380,971
West Yorkshire	32,569	142,946	102,479	277,994	288,865
Wiltshire	13,792	32,481	22,538	68,811	69,715
Total	1,027,153	3,641,681	2,367,265	7,070,687	7,485,832

Source:
1996–97 and 1998–99—CIPFA Police Statistics Actuals

Departmental Smoking Policy

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to reduce smoking in his Department. [105799]

Mr. Straw: Since 1997, smoking has not been allowed in the main central London Home Office buildings, except in designated smoking rooms. National "No Smoking" campaigns are regularly promoted by poster displays, leaflets and other publicity material. "Stop Smoking" courses and displays (organised in conjunction with QUIT) have been held to help staff who wish to give up smoking. A similar programme of events will be run this year.

Drug-related Crimes

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many crimes were committed *(a)* in the last 12 months and *(b)* in the last three years in the UK that were drug-related. [105321]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Statistical data are collected on drug offences only, not on offences which may have been committed due to drug taking. A report published in 1998 on research carried out on behalf of the Home Office by the University of Cambridge sheds light on the links between drugs and crime. Further data are currently being analysed as part of the NEW-ADAM programme for interviewing and drug testing arrestees. It is hoped to publish the next set of full results in the first half of this year.

The research undertaken so far on drug testing of arrestees, based in five locations, indicates that over 60 per cent. of arrestees had recently taken at least one illegal drug prior to arrest. Cannabis was found most often (46 per cent. of cases); heroin/opiates (18 per cent.) and cocaine/crack (10 per cent.) featured quite prominently. These findings confirm the supposition that offenders tend to be heavy consumers of drugs.

Nearly half the arrestees who reported taking drugs within the last year said that their drug misuse was connected with their offending. Among various factors, they emphasised the need for the money to buy drugs. The illegal income of arrestees who said that they had taken heroin and/or crack during the last three days was particularly high—within a range of £10,000 to £20,000 annually. This compared with £4,000 for other arrestees. Illegal income mainly resulted from acquisitive crimes against property. An estimated 32 per cent. of all illegal income was spent on purchasing heroin and/or crack cocaine.

While this study considerably advances knowledge of drugs-crime links, it will always be difficult to calculate a single percentage figure reflecting precisely what proportion of all crimes is drug-related.

Figures on drug offences in 1997 were published in April 1999 in Home Office Statistical Bulletin No. 8/99 "Drug seizure and offender statistics, United Kingdom, 1997". Figures for 1998 will be published in February 2000, copies of which will be placed in the Library.

Drug Seizures

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many *(a)* heroin, *(b)* cocaine and *(c)* synthetic drug seizures have been made in the (i) last and (ii) preceding 12 months; [105322]

(2) what was the average weight of *(a)* heroin, *(b)* cocaine, *(c)* cannabis, *(d)* synthetic drugs and *(e)* all controlled drugs in seizures (i) in the last and (ii) in the preceding 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [105323]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In 1997, the last year for which published figures are available, the number and average weights of selected drugs seized by police and Her Majesty's Customs and Excise were as given in the table. It is not meaningful to calculate the average weight of all drug seizures. Further figures on drug seizures in 1997 were published in April 1999 in Home Office Statistical Bulletin No 8–99 "Drug seizure and offender statistics, United Kingdom, 1997". Figures for 1998 will be published in February 2000, copies of which will be placed in the Library.

Number and average weight of seizures by police and Her Majesty's Customs and Excise of selected drugs in 1997

Drug	Number of seizures		Average quantity seized	
	Police	Customs	Police	Customs
Heroin	12,311	163	40 grams	10,719 grams
Cocaine	3,068	684	91 grams	3,038 grams
LSD	831	20	195 doses	86 doses
Ecstasy-type	4,996	91	93 doses	16,056 doses
Cannabis (herbal)	25,703	3,684	323 grams	6,197 grams
Cannabis (resin)	77,111	2,135	841 grams	25,304 grams
Cannabis (plants)	3,783	1	30 plants	40 plants
Amphetamine	18,429	146	128 grams	6,405 grams

Note:
"Synthetic drug" has been taken to mean the following—Amphetamine, LSD, and Ecstasy-type drugs
Source:
Home Office Drugs Research and Statistics Section

Drug Prices

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the average street prices of *(a)* heroin and *(b)* cocaine per gram in London and Glasgow in the (i) last and (ii) preceding 12 months. [105320]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The National Criminal Intelligence Service collects information on street level prices of drugs. The average prices for heroin and cocaine at the end of 1997 and at the end of 1998 were as given in the table.

Average street prices of heroin and cocaine per gram in London and Glasgow, 1997 and 1998

£

Period	London		Glasgow	
	Heroin	Cocaine	Heroin	Cocaine
December 1997	60–100	60–120	60–80	50–80
December 1998	80	60–120	60–80	50–80

Note:
These prices are based on average purity levels and do not reflect the fluctuations in price which may occur within an area as the result of law enforcement action, other interruption of supply, or even over-supply. The ranges quoted for the above areas are indicative of the most typical prices paid for a one gram wrap of the drug(s). It is not possible to give wholly accurate ranges as a large number of factors come in to play. However, the prices quoted represent a reasonable average price in the areas. Drugs are frequently sold for prices outside these ranges, and prices can be inflated by cutting drugs, and by selling under measures. Prices increase when small amounts such as £10 or £20 deals are sold.
Source:
National Criminal Intelligence Service

Car Theft

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to combat car theft. [105155]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government have announced a target to reduce vehicle crime by 30 per cent. over five years and set up a Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team to develop a strategy for achieving it. The Action Team published a report in September 1999 which set out a comprehensive strategy for achieving the target.

The main measure the Government have taken to date to tackle vehicle crime is to make available £150 million over three years for Closed Circuit Television. Improving car park security (where the 1998 British crime Survey suggests 22 per cent. of vehicle crime takes place) was a priority in Round 1.

Heathrow (CS Gas)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will request a report from the Commissioner for Police for the Metropolis on the incident in which a CS gas canister was discharged at Heathrow Airport on 18 October 1999. [105594]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner for Police for the Metropolis informs me that at 3.50 pm on 18 October, complaints were received from passengers in Terminal 1 Departures about irritation to their eyes, nose and throat. Emergency services attended and found a CS spray canister in a rubbish bin. It appears that fumes from the canister entered the air conditioning system. Nineteen people were affected by the fumes, 14 of whom were taken to Hillingdon Hospital for treatment but discharged within two hours.

The Commissioner tells me that the canister was manufactured in the United States of America, of a type commonly used there for personal safety, and that it was probably discarded by a passenger prior to being scanned before departure. The canister was taken by the police, for disposal.

Anti-social Behaviour

Mr. Mudie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what was his Department's estimate of the average cost of making and enforcing an anti-social behaviour order at the time of the passage of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; [105557]

(2) how many anti-social behaviour orders have been enforced since the passing of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in *(a)* Birmingham, *(b)* Leeds, *(c)* Manchester, *(d)* Newcastle, *(e)* Liverpool and *(f)* Sheffield; [105558]

(3) what is the cost per order of making and enforcing an anti-social behaviour order in *(a)* Birmingham, *(b)* Leeds, *(c)* Manchester, *(d)* Newcastle, *(e)* Liverpool and *(f)* Sheffield. [105556]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The costs quoted in the Financial and Explanatory Memorandum for the Bill assumed an average additional cost of £600 per anti-social behaviour order. This took account of offsetting savings.

Records of the numbers of orders granted and their cost are not held centrally. At this stage, it is too early to say with any accuracy how much it will cost on average to make and enforce orders in these local authority areas.

After an order is made, any breach of it will be subject to criminal proceedings. Enforcement in the form of criminal prosecution for a breach has, as far as we are aware, taken place in respect of one order, in Newcastle.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much was spent on programmes to combat anti-social behaviour in each of the last 10 years. [105708]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* The Government provided specific powers to the police and local authorities to tackle anti-social behaviour in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. Since 1999, agencies and partnerships have been able to bid for funding to help them tackle crime and disorder including anti-social behaviour under the Government's three year Crime Reduction Programme. An example of one which has done so is the Humberside police which has received £406,000 for a targeted policing project to reduce anti-social behaviour and low level criminal behaviour on five beats in Kingston upon Hull. The South Wales police have also received funding of almost £1 million for several targeted policing projects which aim to reduce crime and disorder by young people and public disorder.

The Social Exclusion Unit has chaired a Policy Action Team on Anti-Social Behaviour (PAT 8) to inform the preparation of a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. The PAT 8 report is expected to be published in March. The Home Office, in consultation with the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, will be expected to issue guidance on tackling anti-social behaviour in accordance with the report's recommendations.

Euro 2000

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the likelihood of English football hooligans obtaining tickets for Euro 2000 via the UEFA website; and what guidance he plans to issue to English fans intending to travel on the possibility of violence resulting from such sales. [105248]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Euro 2000 organisers are satisfied that their ticketing arrangements and controls will provide spectators with a safe and secure environment in the stadia and limit the potential for a significant black market in tickets. Experience suggests that the sale of tickets to individuals is easier to control, and poses less risk than a flourishing black market. Arrangements are in place for ensuring that tickets are not sold to people who are banned from attending football matches in their home country. This includes English hooligans who are subject to a Domestic or International Football Banning Order (or Exclusion or Restriction Order prior to enactment of the Football (Offences and Disorder) Act 1999).

The Government, police and Football Association are co-ordinating their preparations and are working closely with the host countries to minimise the risk of some English fans misbehaving during Euro 2000. Guidance will be issued to all fans prior to the tournament, but the message from the Dutch and Belgian authorities is clear: "fans who behave themselves will be made welcome, those who do not will be dealt with very firmly".

DOE Building, Marsham Street

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the reasons are for the length of time taken by the Home Office to decide whether to use the former Department of the Environment buildings at Marsham Street, London SW1. [105499]

Mr. Straw: The reason is the overriding need to examine the options carefully on the basis of which provides the best value for money.

The future of the Marsham Street site rests on the outcome of a public private partnership project to provide modern offices for Home Office and Prison Service staff. The procurement competition was restarted last October after a strategic review of overall Government Office accommodation in the Westminster area.

Proposals from the private sector, including demolition of Marsham Street, are expected shortly. Subject to their evaluation, and the continuing demonstration of value for money, I expect to be in a position to select a Preferred Bidder by mid-year. After a period of negotiations, award of contract would follow towards the end of this year.

As the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), informed the hon. Member in his reply of 6 December 1999, *Official Report*, column 395W, the Home Office has assumed management responsibility for Marsham Street pending final decisions on the future of the site.

Young Offenders

Mr. Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress his Department has made in implementing those parts of sections 97 and 98 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 giving magistrates the power to remand juveniles to local authority secure accommodation; and what assessment he has made of the financial implications of implementation for local authorities. [105851]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The secure remand provisions in sections 97 and 98 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 were implemented on 1 June 1999. Magistrates can remand direct to local authority secure accommodation 12 to 16-year-old girls; 12 to 14-year-old boys; and 15 and 16-year-old boys who are assessed as vulnerable and for whom a place is identified in advance.

The Home Office refunds the estimated net costs to local authorities. These were agreed with the Local Government Association last year as between £1,745 and £2,148 per placement per week depending on area.

EU Mutual Assistance Convention

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy towards liability under the Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters. [106398]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government consider in principle that, when operating legitimately within the United Kingdom, officials from another member state

should have the same liability for offences committed by them as United Kingdom officers. Officials from another member state would have no immunity from arrest and prosecution for an offence committed in the United Kingdom. Officials from outside the European Union or from a multi-national organisation would have the same liability for offences committed by them as a member of the public.

The Government consider in principle that it is the responsibility of officers causing civil damage to repair that damage. Any damage would be repaired as soon as possible, in general by the member state on which the incident took place. A claim would then be made against the law enforcement authority whose officials caused the damage.

Justice and Home Affairs Council

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the 229th Justice and Home Affairs Council, with regard to the implications for the United Kingdom of the draft provisions concerning the establishment of joint investigation teams for cross-border criminal investigations. [106386]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The draft provisions concerning the establishment of joint investigation teams for cross-border criminal investigations do not have any specific implications for the United Kingdom. The provisions are designed to provide a framework within the European Union for future joint investigation teams. The provision states explicitly that it is without prejudice to existing arrangements concerning joint investigations teams such as those currently used on a regular basis by United Kingdom law enforcement authorities such as the police service and Her Majesty's Customs and Excise.

UN Convention on Torture

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there have been under the United Nations Convention on Torture since it was incorporated into United Kingdom law. [106013]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Data on court proceedings collected centrally show that, to date, one defendant was proceeded against under section 134 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988. This was in 1994.

General Pinochet

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what dates, and from which countries, applications for General Pinochet's extradition have been received. [106016]

Mr. Straw: The Spanish request for Senator Pinochet's provisional arrest was received from the Central Court of Criminal Proceedings No. 5 in Madrid on 16 October 1998. Two requests for his extradition have been received from France, on 13 November 1998 and 4 February 1999. A request for extradition was received from Switzerland on 11 November 1998, and renewed on 7 October 1999. A request for extradition was received from Belgium on 15 December 1998 and renewed in amplified form on 12 October 1999.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent requests he has received, other than from the Government of Chile, for a medical examination to be carried out on General Pinochet. [106011]

Mr. Straw: In the past few days I have received a number of requests for a medical examination of Senator Pinochet, in the context of representations made in response to my indication on 11 January that I was minded to take a decision that I will not extradite Senator Pinochet to Spain.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he received the medical report on the state of General Pinochet's health; and to whom he has sent copies. [106008]

Mr. Straw: My officials received the report on 6 January, and I received it in my weekend box on 8 January. It was sent to Senator Pinochet's legal representatives, and the Law Officers and Director of Public Prosecutions, on 11 January.

Working Partnerships (Merseyside)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the working of local partnerships in Merseyside. [106075]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is a strong tradition of good partnership working in Merseyside. We have not made any specific local assessment of it. The strategy document 'The Government's Crime Reduction Strategy', published in November, sets out plans to encourage more effective performance by local crime reduction partnerships.

Drugs

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he is able to publish the statistics for 1998 concerning drugs in Merseyside referred to in his answer of 21 October 1999, *Official Report*, columns 618–20W. [106105]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information on drugs referred to in my answer of 21 October to my hon. Friend will be published during February in the Home Office bulletin on Drug Seizure and Offenders Statistics. A copy of the bulletin and its associated Area and Supplementary Tables volumes will be placed in the Library in the usual way. A set of these publications will be sent to my hon. Friend on the day of publication.

Operation Care

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 24 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 119W, concerning multiple allegations covered by the Operation Care investigation, if he is in a position to provide the information requested. [106104]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In the time available, research has been completed in respect of one scene of investigation as part of the prosecution process. The results are shown in the table which include allegations of sexual and/or physical abuse. Although the table is produced as an illustration, it should not be regarded as representative of the entire database. In most of the other

scenes of investigation, the incidence of multiple allegations is significantly lower. I am advised that it is not the intention to produce further separate tabulations as this would divert resources from the continuing inquiries.

Complainants with multiple allegations	*Percentage of total complainants*
Allegations against 1 person	27.67
Allegations against 2 persons	27.67
Allegations against 3 persons	20.53
Allegations against 4 persons	12.5
Allegations against 5 persons	8.03
Allegations against 6 persons	1.7
Allegations against 7 persons	0.89
Allegations against 8 persons	0.89

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many individuals have been *(a)* charged and *(b)* arrested in connection with Operation Care; and how many individuals have claimed to have been abused and over what period of time. [106103]

Mr. Charles Clarke: A total of *(a)* 41 individuals have been charged and *(b)* 72 arrested in connection with Operation Care. I am advised that the information on the number of complainants is not readily retrievable from the database.

Charity Commission

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to extend the Charity Commission's role in advising charities on issues relating to corporate governance; and if he will make a statement. [105918]

Mr. Boateng: I have no plans to extend the Charity Commission's advisory role. The Commission has a statutory role to give trustees

"information and advice on any matter affecting the charity".

It gives such advice in response to trustees' requests and on its own initiative.

If there is misconduct or mismanagement by trustees, the Commission can intervene directly in the running of the charity. It has statutory powers to remove those responsible for misconduct and to protect the charity's assets from misuse.

Trustees who run their charity in accordance with its constitution and the law have full discretion over the charity's policies and activities, and are accountable for their decisions. The Commission may give advice and information, but it is statutorily debarred from acting in the administration of a charity.

Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the annual number of convicted offenders who would receive a shorter custodial sentence than at present if the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill [Lords] became law. [106091]

Mr. Charles Clarke: It is estimated that about 4,300 convicted offenders would receive shorter custodial sentences because their cases would be dealt with in the magistrates' courts, as would be more appropriate.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Debt Relief

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what budget is available from her Department to monitor and measure the bilateral debt relief initiative. [105680]

Mr. Foulkes: I refer the hon. Member to my reply of 19 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 479W. No attempt is made to disaggregate the resources which the Department for International Development (DFID) spends on monitoring and assessment of its bilateral programme.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she expects each of the heavily indebted poor countries to qualify for bilateral debt relief; and what assessment has been made of the amount of extra money each country will have to spend on poverty eradication in the financial years *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [105744]

Mr. Foulkes: Decisions have not yet been taken on the amount and timing of each country's debt relief under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. The policy announced by the Government on 21 December is to provide complete relief on the remaining debt owed to the UK, after HIPC debt relief has been granted. The specific amount of extra relief that each country will receive in any one year cannot be known until decisions have been taken on their HIPC debt relief. The Government are working with the World bank and the IMF to ensure that countries come forward for HIPC relief as soon as possible; our target is that three quarters of countries receive relief before the end of 2000.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development in which of the countries qualifying for bilateral debt relief her Department has a representative. [105827]

Mr. Foulkes: Countries that could be eligible for bilateral debt relief, if their governments are committed to poverty reduction, are Angola, Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Guyana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Vietnam, Yemen and Zambia. The UK Government have representatives accredited to all these countries. DFID has offices in Kenya and Tanzania and is due to open one shortly in Uganda.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent representations she has made to HM Treasury regarding debt relief; and if she will place a copy of the documents in the Library. [105828]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend has made no representations to the Treasury on debt relief. She and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer share the strong conviction that the purpose of debt relief is to allow countries to invest in poverty reduction programmes and achieve the international development targets. They work closely on the Government's debt relief policy, and this partnership enabled us to deliver our ambitious debt relief objectives last year. In particular, they jointly and

successfully pressed for the substantial improvement in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative agreed at the Annual Meetings of the World Bank and IMF in September 1999. The revised HIPC framework not only provides faster, wider and deeper debt relief, it also increases the impact which this relief has on poverty, through the development and implementation of national poverty reduction strategies. A number of joint DFID and HM Treasury papers on debt, produced for the HIPC Review, have already been placed in the Library.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department takes in co-operation with other national Governments to measure the outcome of debt relief measures. [105830]

Mr. Foulkes: We have consistently stressed that debt relief should only be given to countries who would use it to benefit the poor. We therefore welcome the decision at the Annual Meetings of the World Bank and IMF in September 1999 to tie the debt relief provided under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative to the development of national poverty reduction strategies. In this way, HIPC debt relief provides an opportunity to renew and refocus all development efforts, including resources, on making the greatest possible impact on poverty.

To allow these strategies to be developed, and for their implementation to be monitored, it is essential that greater international efforts are made to improve the availability of good quality information in HIPC countries. In November 1999, the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century was launched. Its aims are to provide statistical assistance to HIPC countries in producing and monitoring their poverty reduction strategies and to develop sustainable statistical capacity in the longer term, to inform and support pro-poor policy making and programme design. Our Department is devoting additional resources to achieve these aims, both bilaterally and multilaterally, working particularly with the World Bank, the UN and the IMF.

Our Department is also looking at what assistance we can provide to civil society to enable them to participate effectively in the discussions on poverty reduction strategies, and monitor their impact, for example to better understand government budgets.

Overseas Visits

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which countries she has visited in the past six months. [105690]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend has visited the following six countries or cities in the last six months:

Countries	*Dates*
Bolivia—Bilateral country visit	28 August to 3 September
Washington—Annual Meetings of IMF/World bank	25 September to 28 September
New York—Speech on UN Reform	26 October
Brussels—Development Council	10 to 11 November
Brussels—General Affairs Council	15 November
Seattle—(WTO)	28 to 30 November

Indonesia

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what response her Department has made to the situation of refugees from the Maluka Islands in Indonesia. [105591]

Mr. Foulkes: Our Department is monitoring the humanitarian situation in the Maluka Islands in Indonesia, and in particular the plight of those who have been internally displaced by the conflict (estimated at 280,000 by the Government of Indonesia). We have not yet been formally approached for assistance, but will consider any appeals put to us following the UN and Government of Indonesia's forthcoming joint humanitarian needs assessment mission to Maluka.

EU Aid

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to review the efficiency of the EU aid budget. [105691]

Mr. Foulkes: We published a strategy paper for our collaboration with the European Union in December 1998 with 18 specific objectives for improving the effectiveness of the European Community's development programmes. Several of these objectives have been achieved and we continue to review the strategy regularly. We welcome the commitment of the new European Commission to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of European Community assistance but will continue to press them to establish a coherent overall development policy, to increase the proportion of European Community development assistance directed at low income and least developed countries, and to improve the management of European Community programmes.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the recent changes to the European aid programme. [105728]

Mr. Foulkes: We welcome the commitments made by the new European Commission to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the European Community's development programmes. Many of these commitments reflect positions in the strategy paper on working with the European Union published by our Department in December 1998. In particular, the Development Commissioner, Poul Nielson, and the External Relations Commissioner, Chris Patten, both called for a clearer poverty focus and for a considerable improvement in the Commission's management of its programmes. In addition, negotiations on a successor to the Lomé Convention governing the EU's relation with 71 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries due to conclude next month should adopt significant improvements in the development focus of the European Development Fund.

However, as evaluations in recent years have shown, the impact of EC programmes has been poor and major changes are needed to improve this. We are therefore continuing to press the Commission to follow through on their commitments, and notably to adopt an overall

development policy, to increase the proportion of European Community development assistance directed at low-income and least developed countries, and to improve the management of European Community programmes.

Renewable Energy

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the effectiveness of partnerships in developing countries to improve access to renewable sources of energy. [105164]

Mr. Foulkes: As we said in the White Paper, we believe that genuine partnerships between developing countries and the donor community are needed if poverty is to be addressed in an effective and coherent way.

With our partners in developing countries we are developing access to renewable sources of energy through our Knowledge and Research programme. As part of this process we have recently produced a guidance note on "Energy for the Rural Poor". A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

French Speaking Countries

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress made in advancing co-operation with French speaking countries. [105660]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend and I, and officials in our Department, maintain close links with French speaking countries and with our French counterparts and meet regularly. As a result of a series of meetings over the last few months we are working together on a variety of development issues, including co-operation on joint evaluations of selected UK and French activities. Last year we agreed with the French and Germans a Joint Declaration on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of EU development assistance. We will continue to build on these initiatives.

Non-governmental Organisations

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the total number of non-governmental organisations supported by her Department in each year since 1 May 1997 and the amount each has received. [105729]

Mr. Foulkes: Two hundred and twenty three UN NGOs received a total of £172.34 million in the financial year 1997–98 from our Department and 209 UK NGOs received a total of £181.58 million in 1998–99.

Information on spending through overseas NGOs is not held separately, but is included in our bilateral country programme expenditure. Full details appear in "Statistics on International Development", a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Information on spending through individual NGOs is not held centrally in the format requested. A full answer to the question in that format could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Export Credits

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact that the end of export credits for military expenditure will have on developing countries. [105826]

Mr. Foulkes: We welcome the Chancellor's announcement of 11 January of a unilateral UK ban on export credits in respect of "unproductive expenditure" to 63 of the world's poorest countries. This extends the UK's unilateral 2-year ban on export credits for unproductive expenditure to Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs) announced in September 1997. This is now being extended indefinitely and widened to cover all countries which are eligible to borrow from the World Bank only on highly concessional terms.

Many of these countries are currently not on cover to receive export credits from the UK. We believe that export credit should only be granted to the poorest countries only where they are used for productive purposes which enable countries to benefit from faster economic growth and increased spending on social services. There is, therefore, a positive role for export credits in these countries. ECGD support for projects in these countries will be cleared by our Department to ensure they are not "unproductive".

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what percentage of her departmental budget was channelled directly to Governments in the developing world in the last three years; [105730]

(2) what percentage of her departmental budget was spent through the private sector in the last 12 months; [105731]

(3) what proportion of her departmental budget was spent through non-Governmental organisations in the last 12 months. [105732]

Mr. Foulkes: The latest available figures are for the 1998–99 financial year. In that year, we estimate that bilateral aid expenditure was as follows:

Channel	*Percentage of 1998–99 bilateral expenditure*
Governments	37
Private sector	47
NGOs	16

Departmental Employees

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development (1) what changes there have been in full-time staff numbers in her Department in the UK and abroad in each quarter between 1 May 1997 and 13 January 1999; [105684]

(2) what changes there have been in Civil Service staff numbers in her Department for each quarter between 1 May 1997 and 13 January 1999. [105685]

Mr. Foulkes: Changes in numbers of full-time posts financed from DFID's running costs budget during the period May 1997 to January 1999 were as follows:

Calendar year/Quarter	*Increase/decrease from the previous quarter*
1997 Q3	−10
1997 Q4	+23
1998 Q1	+42
1998 Q2	+5
1998 Q3	+36
1998 Q4	+34
1999 Q1	−21
Total cumulative increase/decrease over the period	+109

Figures are based on full time equivalents and take account of UK staff only. They exclude staff appointed in country and those contracted and paid from Programme budgets. Figures for the latter could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her officials are registered disabled. [105741]

Mr. Foulkes: Since the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 people formerly registered as disabled are no longer registered as such. However, 2 per cent. of my officials have declared themselves to have a disability.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her officials are women and how many are senior civil servants. [105740]

Mr. Foulkes: Forty four per cent. of the officials in our Department are women, of who 11 are in the Senior Civil Service.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her officials are from ethnic minorities. [105743]

Mr. Foulkes: Six per cent. of the officials in our Department are from an ethnic minority background.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many *(a)* Muslims and *(b)* Sikhs are employed by her Department. [105742]

Mr. Foulkes: We do not collect information on the religious affiliations of staff.

British Council

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many of her Department's contracts has the British Council applied for since 1 May 1997; and in each case who was successful in securing the contract. [105734]

Mr. Foulkes: The exact number of our Department's contracts for which the British Council have bid is not readily available and could only be secured at disproportionate cost. Since 1 May 1997 the British Council have been awarded 28 contracts after a competition with other bidders.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her policy towards the British Council. [105739]

Mr. Foulkes: The British Council is a key provider of services to the UK's effort to eliminate poverty and promote sustainable development. Our Department recognises its many strengths and breadth of experience and, as with other major suppliers, works through its commercial relationship with the Council to secure value for money.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development on what date the responsibility for the British Council reverted to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. [105733]

Mr. Foulkes: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) assumed full responsibility for the British Council from the start of the financial year 1998–99. From this point, the resources previously set aside in the Department for International Development's (DFID) budget for the Council's Grant-in-aid (£30 million in 1989–99) were transferred to FCO.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many contracts her Department has awarded to the British Council since 1 May 1997. [105735]

Mr. Foulkes: Since 1 May 1997 our Department has awarded 131 contracts to the British Council.

TREASURY

Childcare Tax Credits

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures the Government are taking to encourage the take-up of childcare tax credits by low income families in work. [103674]

Dawn Primarolo: The childcare tax credit can be received only as part of an award of the Working Families or Disabled Persons Tax Credits.

A public information campaign to raise awareness of the new tax credits was launched on 7 September using television and press advertising, leaflets, factsheets and posters in post offices, tax and Benefits Agency offices and in Jobcentres. Also, over 21,000 adviser organisations such as Citizens Advice Bureaux, disability groups and local authorities have been provided with their own free supply of information literature.

In addition, 9,000 community based groups were invited to nine regional roadshows in the UK, or two national roadshows in Scotland and Wales, each attended by a Minister and policy experts providing more information on WFTC and DPTC.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 1 December on behalf of his constituent, Mrs. White, forwarded to him by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. [105926]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I replied on 13 January.

Tobacco Revenue

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if real terms increases in spending on the NHS that result from real terms increases in revenues from tobacco will be in addition to the planned increases in real terms spending on the NHS that were announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [105465]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Yes, within the total of managed expenditure determined by the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if spending on the NHS during the period of the second Comprehensive Spending Review, excluding any increases in spending that result from real terms increases in revenues from tobacco, will not be reduced in real terms. [105466]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government are committed to real terms increases in spending on the National Health Service.

Transport Spending

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what real terms increases in spending on public transport and the road network that result from real terms increases in revenues from fuel duties will be in addition to the planned increases in spending on transport announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review. [105467]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Pre-Budget Report stated that decisions on road fuel duties will be on a Budget-by-Budget basis and that if there are any real terms rises in road fuel duties, the revenues will go straight into a ring-fenced fund for the modernisation of roads and public transport. I cannot pre-judge my right hon. Friend's Budget decisions.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if spending on public transport and the road network during the period of the second Comprehensive Spending Review will be reduced in real terms excluding increases in spending that result from real terms increases in revenues from fuel duties. [105468]

Mr. Andrew Smith: No decision has been taken on the level of spending on transport over the next expenditure planning period. Allocations to 2003–04 will be announced in July 2000. Further improvement of the UK's transport system will be an important consideration for the Spending Review.

DTI Investigations

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what role his Department played in the 1998 decision to appoint DTI inspectors to investigate Hollis Industries plc; [105833]

(2) what role his Department has played in discussions with the DTI on the cost of the current investigation into Mirror Group Newspapers plc. [105834]

Mr. Timms: None.

Self-assessment

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he has taken to ensure that no low-income and elderly pensioners are sent inappropriate self-assessment forms by the Inland Revenue in April. [105495]

Mr. Andrew Smith: In July last year, the Paymaster General announced a change to the Self Assessment system designed to take around 200,000 pensioners—up to a quarter of those sent tax returns—out of Self Assessment. The Inland Revenue continue to monitor the Self Assessment system and are committed to keeping under review the criteria for issuing tax returns.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pension Funds (Robert Maxwell)

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he has taken to recover money paid by the Exchequer to pension funds of companies connected with the late Robert Maxwell; and what assessment he has made of whether the assets of those companies have been utilised so as to yield the maximum return to those pension funds and other creditors. [104672]

Mr. Rooker: The Department regularly reviews the ability of the Maxwell pension scheme trustees to repay the £2.5 million emergency funding made available in 1992. Emergency funding is only repayable once the position of all members of the pension scheme concerned has been secured and other scheme liabilities met. To date £223,660 has been repaid. We would expect further substantial repayments of emergency funding to be made in the course of the current calendar year. The realisation of assets in Maxwell companies that have gone into liquidation is a matter for the insolvency practitioners concerned.

Maternity Pay

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost of extending maternity pay from 18 weeks to *(a)* 26 weeks, *(b)* 39 weeks and *(c)* 52 weeks. [104866]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

The additional full year cost in 2000–01 of extending statutory maternity pay at the flat rate

£ million

Option	*Cost Increase*
Extending statutory maternity pay to 26 weeks	140
Extending statutory maternity pay to 39 weeks	370
Extending statutory maternity pay to 52 weeks	590

Note:
These estimates are the overall costs based on the Government Actuary's Department projection of the average number of people on SMP during 2000–01 at any one time of 100,000, assume 100 per cent. take-up and the payment of £59.55 a week.

Carers Allowances

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people aged between 55 and 65 years acting as carers for relatives under the age of 50 years

received *(a)* invalid care allowance and *(b)* carers premium in (i) 1998, (ii) 1988 and 9 (iii) 1978; and what is the projected figure for 2008. [105177]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available.

Pensioners

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the number of pensioners in *(a)* Somerset and *(b)* Yeovil constituency who are entitled to, but not receiving, (i) income support, (ii) housing benefit and (iii) council tax benefit; how much money in each case is unclaimed; and if he will make a statement. [104711]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates of numbers not claiming their entitlement at constituency level.

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners there are in *(a)* Somerset, *(b)* South Somerset and *(c)* Yeovil constituency; and what is the age distribution of such pensioners, indicating the total number aged 80 years or over in each of those areas. [104719]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Mid-1998 estimates of the number of people of pensionable age

Age	*Somerset*	*South Somerset*
60–64 (women)	13,000	3,900
65–69	25,100	7,700
70–74	23,600	7,400
75–79	20,700	6,600
80–84	12,800	4,100
85 plus	12,400	3,800
Total	107,700	33,400

1991 Census information of the number of people of pensionable age

Age	*Yeovil*
Pensionable age to 74	12,200
75–84	6,200
85 and over	1,600
Total	20,000

Notes:

1. Mid-1998 population estimates of the number of people of pensionable age in Somerset and South Somerset are the latest available.

2. Mid-year population estimates are not compiled by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for parliamentary constituencies. The lowest level at which population estimates are available is the local authority level. 1991 Census information has therefore been used to answer part *(c)*.

3. The number of people of pensionable age is not necessarily the same as the number of pensioners.

4. 'Pensionable age' represents males aged 65 and over and females aged 60 and over.

5. Population estimates are rounded to the nearest hundred persons throughout. Age groups have been rounded independently and may not sum to the totals shown.

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action he is taking to improve the take-up by pensioners of *(a)* income support, *(b)* housing benefit and *(c)* council tax benefit; and if he will make a statement. [104712]

Mr. Rooker: An announcement of our plans to encourage pensioners to take-up their entitlement to benefits will be made shortly.

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages of developing a pensioner prices index; and if he will make a statement. [104713]

Mr. Rooker: The Office for National Statistics publish a Pensioner Price Index which reflects the spending patterns of pensioners in the lowest three income deciles. The Index shows that over the last 20 years the rate of price inflation for this group of pensioners is significantly below that of other groups and, if used as a basis for uprating, basic Retirement Pension would be £12.30 lower than it is now. Therefore we have no plans to adopt the Pensioner Price Index as part of the annual review of benefit levels.

Benefit Payment Methods

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what estimate he has made of the savings to the Exchequer from the proposed payment of benefits into bank accounts rather than through post offices from 2003 onwards; what is the estimated saving in each year from 2003–04 to 2008–09; what assumptions about the amount of business which will be transferred from post offices to banks underlie these figures; and if he will make a statement; [104715]

(2) if he will make a statement on the timescale over which it is proposed to move towards paying benefits directly into bank accounts rather than through post offices; and if he will make a statement; [104750]

(3) if he will make it his policy to delay beyond the planned date of 2003 the proposed payment of benefits directly into bank accounts rather than through post offices; and if he will make a statement. [104714]

Mr. Rooker: We have decided to change the way people are paid benefit, from the current paper based methods to automated credit transfer (ACT). This reflects the fact that customers increasingly choose to be paid this way. The move is expected to generate £640 million savings per year from 2005.

Those benefit recipients who wish to collect their benefit in cash at post offices will continue to be able to do so.

It is planned to move to ACT as the normal method of payment for all benefit customers. The move will begin in 2003 and end in 2005.

Pensioners (Income Support)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 11 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 801W, what level of take-up of income support for pensioners is assumed in current forecasts of expenditure. [105316]

Mr. Rooker: Current forecasts assume that expenditure as a result of increased take-up by pensioners will increase by £43 million over the period 1999–00 to 2001–02. This estimate will need to be reviewed in the light of our plans for a national programme to increase pensioner take-up.

Correspondence

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the right hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 2 December on behalf of his constituent, Mrs. Wilson. [105925]

Mr. Darling: I replied to the right hon. Member on 19 January 2000.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the right hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire will receive a reply to his letter of 30 November on behalf of his constituent, Mr. Hausell. [105923]

Mr. Darling: A reply will be sent to the right hon. Member as soon as possible.

Deregulation

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what orders his Department has made under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 in each year since 1994; and what plans it has to introduce such orders. [106083]

Mr. Bayley: This Department has made no orders to date to remove regulatory legislation but we will continue to look for opportunities to use such orders where we can.

We do, however, plan to bring forward an order shortly which will enable our private and voluntary sector partners to play a full role in the delivery of the new ONE service which is currently being piloted.

We have brought forward a range of deregulatory measures on pensions in the Welfare Reform Act 1999 and the current Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Departmental Productivity

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to increase the productivity and reduce the running costs of his Department. [103843]

Mr. Morley: Delivering efficient and modern public services is a key part of the Government's agenda for improving productivity. Greater efficiency is being sought therefore within the public sector to ensure that the most effective results are obtained from available resources. The Ministry's Public Service Agreement (PSA) includes a range of measures for taking this forward, both within the Ministry itself and in other public sector bodies.

Those measures which will help raise the Ministry's own productivity are as follows:

(a) *Better Quality Services*

The Ministry will regularly and systematically review services and activities over a five year period in line with Government policy as set out in the handbook "Better Quality Services". A review programme has been developed, setting out those services that will be reviewed each year with the intention to review at least 60 per cent. of services by March 2003.

(b) *Fraud*

The Ministry will continue to apply controls to detect and prevent fraud and other irregularities under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) farm-based schemes. The Ministry has designated a fraud contact officer to promulgate ministry policy and to give specific advice to managers.

(c) *Sickness Absence*

In line with the central initiative to improve attendance, an internal audit of the sickness absence recording and monitoring systems has been completed and targets set for reducing absence.

(d) *Electronic Government*

The Ministry will exploit opportunities for electronic communications and will increase the proportion of business undertaken electronically to contribute to the Government's commitment to a target of at least 25 per cent. for electronic dealings with the public by 2002.

(e) *Procurement*

The Ministry will combine central responsibility for the management of procurement with devolution of operational procurement where appropriate; develop strategies for delivering best whole life cost solution, optimising operational savings and minimising the administrative costs of procurement; improve information and procedures, and education and training; and undertake benchmarking using maturity profile analysis techniques.

(f) *Asset Sales*

The Ministry will dispose of most of its surplus land and buildings by April 2000.

(g) *CAP Administration*

The Ministry aims to increase the productivity of CAP administration by developing, testing and implementing an integrated IT system for administering CAP schemes by March 2002.

(h) *Efficiency*

The Ministry will also pursue efficiency gains, and will continue to develop better measures of efficiency and extend these to cover a wide range of departmental activities and also the activities of its executive agencies.

The Ministry's running costs provision for 1999–2000 to 2001–02 is set out in its PSA. The productivity measures listed above will enable the Ministry to increase the quantity and quality of its outputs delivered by its running costs expenditure over this period.

Property Sales

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what dates the properties at *(a)* Towy Avenue, Llandovery, Dyfed, *(b)* Station Road, Honeybourne Avenue, Evesham, Worcestershire, *(c)* New Street, East Shilton, Hinckley, Leicestershire and *(d)* 357 Station Road, South Leigh, Oxfordshire, were offered for sale; and what is the current position with regard to the disposal of each property. [104685]

Mr. Morley: The information requested is set out as follows:

Property	*Current position*
Towy Avenue, Llandovery, Dyfed	First offered for sale in June 1997. This property was sold in November 1999.
Station Road, Honeybourne, Evesham, Worcestershire	First offered for sale in August 1997. This property was sold in December 1997.
New Street, Earl Shilton, Hinckley, Leicestershire	First offered for sale in February 1996. Little interest from potential purchasers. Offer to purchase has recently been accepted and legal documentation is now being prepared.
Station Road, South Leigh, Oxfordshire	First offered for sale in November 1994. The property was sold in January 1998.

Fisheries

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what date the six and 12 mile derogations will expire. [105540]

Mr. Morley: Article 6 (1) of Council Regulation (EC) 3760/92 authorises member states to retain restrictions on access by foreign fishing vessels within six and twelve mile limits until 31 December 2002.

The Commission is due to report to the Council by 31 December 2001 on the operation of the Common Fisheries Policy. The Council, acting by Qualified Majority, will then take any necessary decisions, including on the future of the Article 6 provisions, by 31 December 2002. There is clear support for the maintenance of restrictions on access within the six and twelve mile limits. I expect those restrictions to continue after 2002.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his policy towards the encouragement of development of INFOMAR Systems Fishcast and Fishtrade, with particular reference to a possible pilot study on the United Kingdom. [105666]

Mr. Morley: The INFOMAR systems were developed through an EU funded research project. The work led to the development of a software package which facilitates the dissemination of information and provides an ability to trade while at sea. The Government welcome the development of methods of improving communications and the trade in fish. The use of electronic information systems is one area which is being considered for funding under the Agenda 2000 fisheries aid programme.

Rats

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of dwellings in England with rat infestations were *(a)* not being treated and *(b)* had not been reported to the local authority on the most recent date for which figures are available. [105484]

Mr. Morley: Details of the treatment of rat infestations are in the recent MAFF report "Rodent infestations in domestic properties in England", a copy of which has been placed in the Library of the House. The figures reflect the situation at a specific point in time and would not include cases where treatment was planned but had not yet started.

Information was not collected on the proportion of rat infestations which had not been reported to the local authority.

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the findings of the *(a)* 1996 English House Condition Survey and *(b)* commensal rodent survey undertaken by his Department and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health in 1993, on the number and proportion of dwellings in England affected by rat infestations. [105481]

Mr. Morley: The results of the 1996 survey show that the general level of rodent infestations in England is low. The figures are lower for both rats and mice compared to the 1993 survey, although the results are not directly comparable due to different sampling methods. Full results of the 1996 survey are in the recent MAFF report "Rodent infestations in domestic properties in England", a copy of which together with the Ministry's News Release, has been placed in the Library of the House.

The Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 requires local authorities to take such steps as may be necessary to keep, so far as is practicable, their district free of rodents and empowers them to require occupiers of land to take the necessary action to remove rodents from their land.

Pig Sector

Mr. Cawsey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the additional costs to the pig sector as a result of the Welfare of Animals at Slaughter Act 1991 and the Welfare of Livestock Regulations 1994 since they came into force on 1 January 1999. [105435]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* The cost to the pig sector of the prohibition on sow stalls and tethers introduced through the 1994 Regulations will have included capital costs prior to the prohibition's entry into force on 1 January 1999 as well as ongoing management costs since. These were all covered in a Compliance Cost Assessment which was placed in the Library of the House at the time the Regulations were made: we have not assessed the costs since 1 January 1999.

The Welfare of Animals at Slaughter Act 1991 does not contain provisions imposing costs on the pig sector.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will seek the introduction of a European ban on stall and tether rearing of pigs and the introduction of standard animal welfare regulations in the European Union. [105029]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* We shall continue to press the EU Commission to bring forward their overdue proposals for updating the existing rules on pig welfare. The Commission's expert Scientific Veterinary Committee—on whose report the Commission's proposals must be based—was published in October 1997 and confirms our view that stalls and tethers for sows are unacceptable.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ban the import from the EU of pork reared in stalls and tethers. [105028]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 17 January 2000]:* Under the Treaty of Rome it is illegal to ban imports of meat on animal welfare grounds. We are actively seeking to improve welfare standards at EU and Council of Europe level.

Sugar

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if it is his policy that reforms of the Sugar Protocol and Lomé Convention should include measures to provide support for traditional suppliers of cane; and if he will make a statement. [105493]

Mr. Foulkes: I have been asked to reply.

Negotiations on a successor to the Lomé Convention between the European Union and the 71 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries are due to conclude next month. We expect the present trade arrangements to be extended during a transition period from 2000 to 2008. After that date, new trade arrangements will enter into force. The Sugar Protocol will roll forward unchanged but will be reviewed before the end of the transition period. We would assess the need for support measures at the time of, and within the context of, the Review of the Sugar Protocol. We recognise the importance of the sugar trade to the economies of many ACP States, and our Department has commissioned research work to consider the consequences of possible reforms of the Sugar Protocol. The work is at an early stage, but it clearly indicates that some countries will face adjustment problems. In the time up to the Review it remains vitally important that the ACP continue their own efforts to improve their competitiveness.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Transport Costs (EU)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress made by the European Commission's Committee of Experts on transport costs. [105608]

Mr. Hill: I have been asked to reply.

As envisaged in the Commission's White Paper on fair payment for infrastructure use, a committee of Government experts on charging for the use of transport infrastructure was set up to advise the Commission. The committee has been supported by a group of independent experts. The experts have produced two reports, one on estimating transport costs, and one on options for charging users directly for transport infrastructure operating costs. These reports cover, among other things, methods of calculating and charging for transport infrastructure costs, congestion and scarcity costs, accident costs and environmental costs. The committee has also acted as a forum for the exchange between member states of research and other information on infrastructure charging issues.

Burma

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current situation in Burma. [105278]

Mr. Battle: There has been no improvement in the political and human rights situation in Burma. The UK remains committed to pressing for change and for dialogue between the regime and democratic leaders, including ethnic minorities. We take every opportunity to do so: for example, we support the EU Common Position on Burma (a package of measures against the regime) and have co-sponsored UN resolutions—most recently at the UN General Assembly in November—critical of the regime.

Pakistan

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's policy toward arms sales to Pakistan. [105184]

Mr. Hain: There has been no change to our policy of considering export licence applications for Pakistan on a case-by-case basis against our national criteria and those in the EU Code of Conduct for Arms Exports, and in the light of the statement on 10 July 1999, made to the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) following the Pakistani and Indian Nuclear tests.

Child Labour

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with representatives of the International Labour Organisation on child labour; and which issues were discussed during 1999. [105511]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary had talks with the Director General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Juan Somavia, in London last September. They discussed a range of issues including: measures to address child labour, modernisation of the ILO, and co-operation between the ILO, the World Trade Organisation and the International Financial Institutions.

Mr. Somavia also had talks with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the then Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities, who confirmed the Government's intention to ratify ILO Conventions 138 and 182, both relating to child labour.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what Ministers from his Department have visited Sri Lanka since 1 May 1997. [105597]

Mr. Hain: The late Minister of State, Derek Fatchett, visited Sri Lanka from 10–11 November 1998. I am planning to visit Sri Lanka later this year.

Subcontinent (UK Entry Applications)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the average waiting time for interview at British High Commission offices in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka for a person seeking *(a)* permanent settlement in the United Kingdom, *(b)* to attend further and higher education courses and *(c)* visits to members of their family living in the UK in the last 12 months. [105510]

Mr. Vaz: Waiting times for settlement and non-settlement interviews fluctuate over the year in response to seasonal pressures. The following figures were the waiting times for settlement interviews at the end of December 1999 in the countries concerned:

Weeks

Post	*Q1*	*Q2*	*Q3*	*Q4*
India				
Bombay	0	5	5	5
New Delhi	0	7	20	25
Pakistan				
Islamabad	9	39	44	50

See explanation of Q1-Q4 system below

The visa sections at Calcutta, Colombo, Karachi and Madras have a standard single queue for all settlement applications. Their current waiting times are:

Calcutta: currently no queue

Colombo: 8 weeks

Karachi: 14 weeks

Madras: 5 weeks

Queue 1–4 system:

Queue 1—Right of Abode cases and Dependant Relatives over 65;

Queue 2—Spouses and Children under 18;

Queue 3—Fiance(e)s and other First Time Applicants; and

Queue 4—Re-applicants.

The statistics held centrally on applicants visiting the United Kingdom, either as family visitors or as students, are not held in such a way as to provide figures for parts *(b)* and *(c)* of my hon. Friend's question. A comprehensive reply could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Most visit visa applications are straightforward and are normally processed within 24 hours. Many student applications are also processed without delay. However, where a more detailed examination of the application is required, the applicant (student or visitor) will be asked to return at a later date for interview. The waiting times for such interviews (known as Tier 3 interviews) in the countries in question at the end of December 1999 were as follows:

India

Bombay: No queue

Calcutta: No queue

Madras: 2 days

New Delhi: No queue

Pakistan

Islamabad: 5 days

Karachi: 22 days

Sri Lanka

Colombo: 22 days.

I shall be visiting the Sub-Continent shortly to view these arrangements. I have asked the Entry Clearance Manager in Islamabad to see me within the next two weeks.

Cyprus

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent steps he has taken to encourage *(a)* the Greek Government, *(b)* the Turkish Government and *(c)* the Government of Cyprus to resolve the issue of Northern Cyprus. [105159]

Mr. Vaz: The UK is playing a leading role in support of UN efforts towards a settlement in Cyprus. We warmly welcomed the launch of UN proximity talks in New York on 3 December preparing for the negotiation of a comprehensive settlement. We strongly endorse the UN Secretary-General's intention to continue these talks early this year. We are in frequent contact with the Cypriot parties and with the Governments of Greece and Turkey and are encouraging them to co-operate with the Secretary-General constructively and flexibly.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the timetable for the accession of Cyprus to the European Union. [105158]

Mr. Vaz: Cyprus is making good progress in its EU accession negotiations, which we welcome. Twenty-three of the 31 chapters of the EU's legislation and practice have been discussed to date and 11 provisionally closed—the most of any candidate. The remaining chapters should be opened this year. It is not yet possible to predict when any of the candidates will join the EU. The faster Cyprus implements EU legislation the sooner it will be in a position to join.

The Helsinki European Council stated that a political settlement would facilitate, but not be a precondition for, Cyprus' accession. We warmly welcomed the launch of UN proximity talks in New York in December, preparing for the negotiation of a comprehensive settlement in Cyprus, and strongly endorse the UN Secretary-General's intention to continue these talks early this year.

Iran

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on the affiliations and roles of Ghobad Mansour-Beigi, Reza Molai and Alireza Ali-Hosseini; and what assessment he has made of these reports. [105238]

Mr. Hain: According to Iranian press reports, the three people named in my hon. Friend's question were killed during a terrorist attack by the Mujaheddin-e-Khalq Organisation in the border town of Ilam on 9 January. I condemn this latest act of terrorism by the Mujaheddin-e-Khalq Organisation.

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he discussed events in the province of Ilam in Iran when he met the Iranian Foreign Minister. [105237]

Mr. Hain: During his recent visit Foreign Minister Kharrazi mentioned an attack by the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq Organisation (MKO) in which several people were killed. Our Embassy in Tehran reported separately that the city of Ilam had been hit by a mortar attack on 8 January which killed three people and injured five. The MKO were reported locally as having claimed responsibility. The UK Government condemn this terrorist attack as we condemn all acts of terrorism, wherever they occur.

Indonesia (Arms Embargo)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the current EU arms embargo on Indonesia covers *(a)* all arms licences and *(b)* all military items still awaiting delivery to Indonesia. [105899]

Mr. Battle: As my hon. Friend the Minister of State, the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) told the House on 17 January 2000, *Official Report*, column 325W, the EU arms embargo is no longer in effect and, we will therefore consider any future applications strictly according to an agreed criteria, bearing in mind the current and future situation in Indonesia.

General Pinochet

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library *(a)* notes of meetings and *(b)* copies of correspondence with the Government of Chile concerning the (i) proposed extradition and (ii) medical condition of General Pinochet. [106009]

Mr. Battle: It is not our practice to make publicly available the contents of either notes of meetings or copies of correspondence with other Governments. The details of contacts of this nature are confidential to the Governments concerned.

Chile

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what requests have been made to the United Nations Secretary General since September 1973 for an international judicial process on human rights in Chile; and if he will make a statement. [106012]

Mr. Battle: We cannot answer for other Governments, NGOs or individuals, and we are not aware of any requests from HMG. The information required to provide an accurate answer is not centrally held, and to do so would incur disproportionate costs.

Honorary Consuls

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the serving honorary consuls who are British citizens giving *(a)* the posts in which they serve, *(b)* the date of their appointment and *(c)* the honours that have been awarded to them since they took up their appointments. [105895]

Mr. Hain: I will write to the hon. Member shortly.

Departmental Properties

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those properties held by his Department and agencies responsible to him which are *(a)* wholly and *(b)* mainly unoccupied at present, giving locations and when they became so unoccupied in each case. [105302]

Mr. Battle *[pursuant to his reply, 19 January 2000, c. 478W]:* An administrative error led to an omission in my answer of 19 January to the hon. Member. The correct answer should read as follows:

FCO policy is that no property should be left vacant unless this is unavoidable in the short-term or there are good reasons for retention (such as a break in diplomatic relations, as in Tripoli, Baghdad and Kabul). Properties which are surplus to our requirements are disposed of at an appropriate time (we had the former Residence in Jakarta on the market, but withdrew it when the market collapsed).

HEALTH

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to publish guidelines for the treatment of prostate cancer in the NHS. [101494]

Yvette Cooper: We are determined to improve the prevention, detection and treatment of prostate cancer. The work programme for the National Institute for Clinical Excellence was announced on 4 November and includes the development of clinical guidelines on urological cancers—which will incorporate prostate cancer. This will be the first in the series of guidelines on cancers to look at cancers which affect mostly men. It is expected that the detailed work on this cancer guideline will take until at least the end of 2000.

"The Widening Gap"

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the recent publication, "The Widening Gap", by Bristol University, on inequalities in health provision. [101689]

Yvette Cooper: I was interested to see this report which suggests that there are a number of key determinants which impact on health and health inequalities.

The former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), appointed Sir Donald Acheson to carry out an inquiry into health inequalities. Sir Donald's report, published in November 1998, described the socio-economic determinants of health inequalities and made

recommendations which contributed to the development of our health strategy, "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation". A key aim of our strategy is to reduce health inequalities and narrow the health gap.

In "Reducing Health Inequalities: An action report" published with "Saving Lives" we identified some of the key actions we are taking across Government to tackle health inequalities.

Power Lines

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of recent evidence linking radiation from power lines and cancer. [101690]

Yvette Cooper: The results of the first part of the United Kingdom Childhood Cancer Study were published in *The Lancet* in December. This is the largest UK study on childhood cancer to date. It started in 1992 and has examined a number of factors which might be implicated in childhood cancer. The present study provides no evidence that exposure to magnetic fields associated with the electricity supply in the UK increases risks for childhood leukaemia, cancers of the central nervous system, or any other childhood cancer. Also published in December were two studies in the International Journal of Radiation Biology. In these studies, scientists from Bristol University report observations of increased deposition of natural radionuclides near power lines. From these measurements it is inferred that other pollutants in the environment, such as car exhaust fumes, will behave similarly and this may be a cause of childhood leukaemia. The National Radiological Protection Board Advisory Group on Non Ionising Radiation have been reviewing the research in this area and will be reporting soon.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations the Government have received on Professor Henshaw's report on High Voltage Power Lines and Public Health; and if he will make a statement. [101622]

Yvette Cooper: Professor Henshaw's two reports on "High Voltage Power Lines and Public Health" were published in The International Journal of Radiation Biology on 2 December 1999. The Department has received a number of telephone inquiries from members of the public about the report since its publication.

We are aware of concerns about possible health effects from electromagnetic fields and are supporting some of Professor Henshaw's research among a number of projects within the Department's Radiation Protection Research Programme.

The Department will consider the results of this study in the context of other work in this area and has asked for views from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB), and its Advisory Group.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of *(a)* Professor Henshaw's report and *(b)* that of the Electricity Association about the health aspects of overhead line transmissions; and if he will make a statement. [102134]

Yvette Cooper: Two reports from Professor Henshaw were published in December in the International Journal of Radiation Biology. These studies reported observations of increased deposition of natural radionuclides near power lines. From these measurements it is inferred that other pollutants in the environment, such as car exhaust fumes, will behave similarly and this may be a cause of childhood leukaemia. Also published in December were the results of the first part of the United Kingdom Childhood Cancer Study in *The Lancet*. The costs of this study were met by leukaemia charities, Government and the electricity supply industry. It is the largest UK study on childhood cancer to date. The study provides no evidence that exposure to magnetic fields associated with the electricity supply in the UK increases risks for childhood leukaemia, cancers of the central nervous system, or any other childhood cancer. The National Radiological Protection Board Advisory Group on Non Ionising Radiation have been reviewing the research in this area and will be reporting soon.

Artificial Sweeteners

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received in relation to *(a)* Aspartame and *(b)* other artificial sweeteners; and if he will make a statement. [102309]

Yvette Cooper: In the last 12 months the Department has received 32 representations in relation to Aspartame and six representations in relation to other artificial sweeteners. These raised issues about possible health effects of artificial sweeteners. The Department receives advice on these matters from the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment.

Fluoridation

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy on fluoridation of drinking water. [102351]

Yvette Cooper: In our White Paper, "Saving Lives: Our Healthier Nation", which was published on 6 July we announced that we have commissioned an up-to-date expert scientific review of fluoride and health. If the review confirms that there are benefits to dental health from fluoridation and that there are no significant risks, we intend to introduce an obligation on water companies to fluoridate where there is strong local support for doing so.

NHS Direct

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of NHS Direct calls received each day between 27 December and 12 January were from people complaining of influenza symptoms; and what percentage of these callers were instructed to go to hospital. [105679]

Ms Stuart: NHS Direct received in total 194,521 calls between 27 December and 12 January. Indications are that between 30 per cent. and 40 per cent. of calls during this period related to influenza symptoms. During this period the overall proportion of callers who were advised to attend their accident and emergency department was 6 per cent. and 2 per cent. of callers were diverted to the 999 service.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if a person who has been instructed to go to hospital by NHS Direct and is found to have influenza is included in the official influenza figures. [105678]

Ms Stuart: Influenza activity in England is monitored through the Royal College of General Practitioners sentinel surveillance scheme. This records the number of first visits to a general practitioner with influenza-like illness. Other respiratory illnesses prevalent at this time of year are recorded separately.

This system cannot measure the real incidence of influenza since it is restricted to those people who visit their general practitioner. Patients of the type referred to are therefore not included. This year a major campaign was run to encourage people to choose their own remedy, to consult a pharmacist and to use NHS Direct, as alternative sources of advice.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many nurses working for NHS Direct were, in their previous employment, working full-time in the NHS. [105672]

Ms Stuart: NHS Direct accounts nationally for 600 (whole-time equivalent) nurses, a small number against the overall size of the nursing workforce, which is 332,000 (whole-time equivalent) in England (as of 30 September 1998). Specific information, such as the previous employment of NHS Direct nurses is not collected centrally. NHS Direct has deliberately recruited nurses from a wide range of different backgrounds: hospitals, primary care, outside the NHS. Some will be from a hospital background but others will be from primary care or will have been working outside the NHS. NHS Direct has also provided opportunities for the disabled and those who had to stop working in the ward\hospital because of other injuries. Many staff who work for NHS Direct do so on a part time basis allowing them to combine working for NHS Direct with other clinical duties.

Accident and Emergency Units

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many major accident and emergency units have their full complement of consultants; and how many of these units have consultants on duty 24 hours a day. [105518]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Influenza Vaccination

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will assess the benefits of introducing a programme of systematic vaccination of those health care workers working with the elderly. [105637]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* United Kingdom Health Ministers are advised on immunisation policy by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). JCVI reviews its recommendations, including immunisation of healthcare workers, annually.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons NHS trusts were advised to vaccinate staff on the grounds of reducing absenteeism over the Millennium holiday. [105632]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* Decisions on whether to offer routine vaccinations to staff and, if so, to which groups of staff, were taken at local level by National Health Service trusts as a part of their winter planning arrangements.

Trusts were advised through a Health Service Circular issued on 24 September 1999 to consider the possible impact of staff absence through illness at a time of exceptional pressure over the extended Millennium holiday period.

In reaching their decisions, trusts were also reminded of the possible risks associated with immunisations.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the uptake of influenza vaccine has been among *(a)* the over 75s, *(b)* the over 65s, *(c)* the under 5s and *(d)* medically vulnerable groups in the last twelve months. [105634]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* The most recent estimates of vaccine uptake were published in Health Trends (1998; 30: 51–55). Copies are available in the Library.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reason an age limit of 75 years was chosen for a pro-active campaign of influenza vaccination among the elderly. [105639]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* People aged 75 and over without underlying risk conditions and not living in residential care were added to the individuals recommended for flu immunisation in 1998. This followed advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. The rationale was set out in a letter from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Nursing Officer (PL/CNO/98/4, PL/CNO/98/6), copies of which are available in the Library.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what measures he will take to increase the levels of influenza vaccination among *(a)* those aged over 75 years, *(b)* those aged under 5 years and *(c)* those with medical conditions making them particularly susceptible to influenza; [105640]

(2) what plans he has to increase the level of public awareness about the uptake of the influenza vaccine. [105633]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* Influenza immunisation aims to reduce the morbidity and mortality due to flu by immunising those people most likely to have a severe or complicated illness due to flu. Immunisation is, therefore recommended for all those in whom the disease is more likely to be a serious illness, that is people:

with chronic respiratory or heart disease or renal disease, diabetes and those who are immunocompromised

living in long stay residential accommodation

aged 75 and over.

In advance of this year's winter season the Department was involved in a range of activities to publicise the need for flu immunisation. GPs were reminded of the importance of flu immunisation in last August's CMO Update and about ordering Department of Health leaflets and posters on influenza and influenza immunisation.

Research has shown that the single most important factor affecting whether an individual is immunised or not is whether the doctor or nurse recommended it.

The Chief Medical Officer launched Flu Awareness Week at a press conference in October 1999. This annual event results in widespread media coverage and gives a useful opportunity to get key messages across to the general public. Flu Awareness Week is organised by the Association for Influenza Monitoring and Surveillance (aims) who organise media based awareness work each autumn. Other organisations, such as Help the Aged, support this activity as well as producing their own leaflets for the public.

Those in the risk groups were encouraged to come forward for immunisation through placed articles in the general and women's press and through relevant representative groups. This year's "Keep Warm, Keep Well" campaign encourages older people to keep healthy this winter and included information on influenza and immunisation. Help The Aged's "Senior Line" was briefed on the importance of influenza immunisation. As part of the work on Flu Awareness Week, (aims) worked with various representative groups such as the British Lung Foundation, the British Heart Foundation, to promote awareness.

The Department will review how well these activities worked to increase awareness of influenza immunisation and will plan next winter's activities to increase uptake of vaccine on the basis of the lessons learned from this winter's activity.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many doses of the vaccine for the flu are currently available. [105629]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* Manufacturers advise that they had over half a million doses of flu vaccine available during the week ending 16 January 2000.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what alternatives to the current influenza vaccine are available to those with an egg allergy. [105638]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* Flu vaccine should not be given to individuals with known anaphylactic hypersensitivity to egg products—simple allergy to egg is not a contraindication. For these small number of individuals who are also in high risk groups amantadine hydrochloride may be prescribed prophylactically by the person's doctor where it is clinically necessary.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the extent of regional variations in the availability of the influenza vaccine. [105630]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 18 January 2000]:* None. Influenza immunisation is primarily delivered through general practice. General practitioners order vaccine direct from the manufacturers according to their requirements.

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the funding available for an influenza vaccination programme. [105631]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 20 January 2000]:* The Department will be reviewing this winter's influenza immunisation programme before planning next winter's activity. We will consider any implications for funding the programme in the light of this review.

NHS Dentistry

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he expects to announce the Government's plans to improve the availability of NHS dentistry in *(a)* Somerset and *(b)* England as a whole; [104720]

(2) if he will make a statement on the availability of NHS dentistry in the Yeovil constituency; [104721]

(3) what assessment he has made of the areas of England where it is most difficult to register as an adult with an NHS dentist; and if he will make a statement. [104718]

Mr. Hutton: The Government are aware of the current problems experienced in accessing dental services, which we inherited from the previous Government. Access problems for adults are most acute in the south and west of the country, including the Yeovil constituency. We have taken positive steps to address these problems. The Investing in Dentistry initiative saw a £10 million investment in dentistry, including eight approved bids in Somerset, one of which was in Yeovil, while the personal dental services pilots have allowed for local flexibility in service provision. £203,000 has been awarded in grants in Somerset which will allow for 18,750 additional registrations.

We are also piloting dental access centres, providing fast and convenient access to dentistry in areas with acute access problems. Two dental access centres opened last year, and a further six will come on line this winter. On 5 January my noble Friend Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, the Under-Secretary of State, announced 34 successful expressions of interest for a third wave of dental access centre pilots. A proposal from Somerset has been successful at this stage. These potential centres must now submit a full business case, and if successful, will be operational by the end of the year.

More will be done to address problems of access in the NHS dental strategy. The strategy, to be published shortly, will set the future pace and direction of development of dentistry in England.

Mr. Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what percentage of *(a)* adults and *(b)* children were registered with an NHS dentist in each English county in (i) 1985–86, (ii) 1990–91, (iii) 1995–96, (iv) 1996–97, (v) 1997–98, (vi) 1998–99 and (vii) 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement; [104716]

(2) what was the total number of *(a)* adults and *(b)* children registered with an NHS dentist in each year since 1985 in (i) Somerset and (ii) Yeovil constitutency; and if he will make a statement. [104717]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

NHS Car Parks

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS hospital trusts levy charges for visitor car parking; what is the annual income raised by such

charges; and if he has circulated advice to trusts on the waiving of charges, including penalties, in cases of emergency or on compassionate grounds. [106015]

Ms Stuart: The number of National Health Service trusts charging for visitor car parking is not collected centrally. The amount raised from car park charges is not separately identified within trust financial returns. Advice issued to trusts in 1996 on car parking charges suggested that special consideration needed to be given to the needs of some categories of visitors and staff.

WALES

EU Structural Funds (Alyn and Deeside)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultations he has had with other Departments concerning the award of EU Objective 2 status to the constituency of Alyn and Deeside; and if he will make a statement. [105553]

Mr. Paul Murphy: My Department worked closely with other Government Departments and with the National Assembly for Wales on the UK's proposed Objective 2 map for the period 2000–06. This was approved last month by the European Commission. The Welsh map was unchanged from the UK Government's proposals of 8 October, a copy of which I sent to all Welsh MPs and MEPs.

Objective 1

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the *(a)* European Commission and *(b)* UK representative office in Brussels on spending on the Objective 1 programme in 2000 and the criteria for Wales taking up its full entitlement of such funding; and if he will make a statement. [106062]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I visited Brussels last month and met officials from the UK Permanent Representation to the European Union and from the European Commission to discuss a range of issues. However, the negotiations with the European Commission on the content of the Objective 1 plan, including the spending profile, are a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if funding for expenditure on Objective 1 in Wales in the financial year 2000–01 is additional to the budget provided for the National Assembly for Wales. [106082]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Funding for the European Union grant element of Objective 1 expenditure in Wales will be from within the National Assembly's budget. For the financial year 2000–01 the Assembly estimates Objective 1 expenditure of around £25 million, which I am assured can be met from within the Welsh Block.

Wales Office Staff

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list *(a)* the number of staff and *(b)* their grades in the Wales Office in London. [106068]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Wales Office in London currently has the following staff:

Grade	*Number*
Senior Civil Service	2
Band F	4
Band E	1
Band D	5
Band C	7
Band B	7
Band A	6
Drivers	2
Special Adviser	1

The Wales Office also employs the following staff who are based in Cardiff:

Grade	*Number*
Special Adviser	1
Band G	1

Engagements

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the official engagements of the Under-Secretary of State in the Wales Office for the period 10 to 23 January. [106067]

Mr. Paul Murphy: During this period, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State attended four Cabinet Committee meetings; various meetings with officials in Cardiff and officials in London and attended to other ministerial business. On 18 January he wound up the opposition debate on the Health Service, on 19 January he answered questions on the Floor of the House; and on 21 January he will meet with local councils to discuss the Local Government Bill and will meet with National Power at Deeside.

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SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 342**

SESSION 1999–2000

10th January—20th January 2000

Printed indexes to Hansard

The volume index is one of three printed indexes to Commons Hansard produced from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Indexing Service (POLIS). It contains references to material in the bound volumes of Hansard. The other indexes produced are:

- The fortnightly index to Hansard. This covers the same date range as the volume index but references are to the column numbering in the daily parts and weekly edition of Hansard.
- The sessional index to Hansard. This contains references to material in the bound volumes for a whole session.

Indexes on the Parliamentary website

Fortnightly, volume and sessional indexes covering material from the beginning of the 1999/2000 session will also appear on the Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk with links to the full text of Hansard.

SCOPE

The indexes include entries covering:

- The content of all material recorded in Hansard, including debates, procedural motions and questions.
- The names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard.
- The names of some types of Parliamentary business whenever they occur in Hansard. These are 'Ministerial statements', 'Business statements', 'Opposition days' and 'Estimates days'.

ARRANGEMENT

- All headings are in one word-by-word alphabetical sequence, with Members' contribution entries distinguished from other entries by italics.
- Where a Member contributes to Parliamentary business and is the subject of Parliamentary business there are separate contribution and subject entries, the subject entry coming first.
- Entries beginning 'Mac' and 'Mc' are sorted in one sequence as 'Mac'.
- 'St', when abbreviated for Saint, is filed as 'Saint'.
- Numbers are filed as if spelt out, e.g. '10 Downing Street' as if 'Ten Downing Street'.

HEADINGS

Choice of headings

- *Specificity*—Entries summarise the overall content of a debate or question as specifically as the various POLIS thesauruses allow. For example, Education, Higher education, Universities or the name of a particular university is used depending on the breadth of the item.
- *Name headings*—Specific entries are included for the names of people, places, institutions, organisations, committees, programmes, initiatives, publications and legislation when these constitute the overall subject of an item.
- *Organisations and subjects*—Organisation entries are preferred for material about the general performance, administration and staffing of an organisation (for example, United Kingdom Passports Agency, Standards). Subject entries are preferred for what organisations do as part of their duties (for example, Passports, Fees and charges).

Geographical coverage

- *Subject headings*—Subject headings are assumed to refer to the whole of England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom unless otherwise stated.
- *Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales*—Material relating to the whole of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is indexed under these headings.
- *Places within the UK*—Material about specific towns, areas and institutions is entered under the name of the specific town, area or institution.
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- *EC/EU material*—General material about the European Communities and European institutions as bodies is entered under 'European Communities' and 'EC institutions'. Organisational material about specific communities and institutions is entered under the name of the body, for example 'European Coal and Steel Community' or 'European Parliament'. Material about what the Communities and institutions are doing or propose to do is entered under various subject headings beginning 'EC' such as 'EC environmental policy'.

Parliamentary material and business

- *Material about Parliament*—This is indexed under 'Parliament', the names of the two Houses, the 'Palace of Westminster' and parts of the Parliamentary estate (such as 'Portcullis House').
- *Committees*—Material about committees is indexed under 'Committees', types of committee (such as 'Select committees') and the names of individual committees (such as 'Home Affairs Select Committee').
- *Parliamentary proceedings/procedures*—Material discussing these is indexed under the specific type of proceeding (such as 'Parliamentary questions' or 'Oral questions'), procedure (such as 'Calling of Members') or issue (such as 'Unparliamentary expressions').
- *Legislation*—Entries for Parliamentary proceedings on bills and statutory instruments are entered under their titles. Where the lead word of the bill or statutory instrument does not provide a full or clear indication of the subject there are additional subject entries when the bill or instrument is debated. For example, debates on the 'Child Support Pensions and Social Security Bill' have entries under 'Pensions' and 'Social security benefits' as well as under the title of the Bill.
- *Members' names*—These are given in the form by which the Member prefers to be known.
- *Speaker and Chair*—Contributions by the Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker and deputies'. Contributions from the chair during Committees of the Whole House are brought together under 'Chairman of Committee of the Whole House'. Significant rulings and statements (as opposed to routine comments) are indicated by the sub-heading 'Rulings and statements' in both cases.

Guidance on headings

- *Cross references*—'See' references indicate all the material has been entered under another heading. 'See also' references indicate that additional information may be found under another heading.
- *Concept thesaurus*—A copy of the subject thesaurus to POLIS, listing the concept entries used in the index, is available on the Parliamentary website. A hard copy is available from the Head of the POLIS Unit, House of Commons Library, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG (020 7219 6456).

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- References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
- References to debates, but not questions, are accompanied by the date of the item.
- There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings and written questions:
  - References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
  - References ending in 'wh' indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
  - References ending in 'w' indicate written questions.
- References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting or is a written question.
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  - *Debates etc.* (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  - *Sittings in Westminster Hall* (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings); and
  - *Questions* (which includes written, oral and private notice questions).

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used in connection with the progress of bills:

- 1R=First reading
- 2R=Second reading
- Com=Committee stage
- Rep=Report stage
- 3R=Third reading
- res=resolution
- amendt(s)=amendment(s)
- *=matter taken formally without debate or division.

Parliamentary background

- The Parliamentary website at http://www.parliament.uk contains a range of information about Parliament and the full text of some Parliamentary papers and proceedings including Hansard.
- Information on current Parliamentary business is provided in the House of Commons Information Office *Weekly Information Bulletin*, available on the website and from The Stationery Office (020 7873 8499).
- Further information on Parliamentary proceedings and procedures is available from the House of Commons Information Office (020 7219 4272).

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